THE SPACE BETWEEN POINTS AND THEIR NAVIGATIONAL REFERENCE

Darla Pienciak

University of Montana

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THE SPACE BETWEEN POINTS AND THEIR NAVIGATIONAL REFERENCE
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Thesis Paper
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in Printmaking

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2020

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Pienciak, Darla, M.F.A., May 2020

Studio Art: Printmaking

The Space Between Points and Their Navigational Reference

Chairperson: Jennifer Combe

“The path of self-fulfilment means “pushing oneself beyond oneself”, in a relationship with the community where generosity, giving and the search for the common good are included and cultivated in everyday life.” (Menditto, 2014)

The Space Between Points and Their Navigational Reference represents specific points in time as well as all the moments that take place between those points. Each point is a person or a specific moment in time; they are individual people or noteworthy memories which, for one reason or another, have left a significant imprint in the memory of the individual or of society. The space between is everything else that happens, every single moment, whether remembered or not; it shapes how we interact with the world around us, it informs how we process information, and affects whether we stop and listen to one another or if we instead put up walls and push away. All of this space between creates our navigational compass through life. The exhibition is composed of an installation, Rhizomatic, and a series of screen prints, which are titled based on the year that the original photograph was taken. The exhibit as a whole draws attention to bonds made, rites of passage, and moments worth cherishing; it combines installation and printmaking.
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INTRODUCTION

“We are in the midst of preparing for the epiphany of an interdisciplinary culture around the human being, thanks to which the community dimension is encouraged. Community thought agrees with the statements that support the relational aspect of man, as only in it can the person define himself and recognize his own diversity, which is revealed through interpersonal communion with the other. To deny the other makes us incomprehensible.” (Menditto, 2014)

As humans, we gain meaning and value within the context of other humans. With this statement, I am not suggesting that in order to feel validated, you need someone else to acknowledge you; instead, I am acknowledging the social nature of humans, and the idea that every person and experience gains meaning through context, and in turn gives meaning to future encounters and experiences. For example, a candle might seem bright in a pitch black room, but the same candle seems dim when compared to the sun. By connecting to others, we can rediscover ourselves, by contrasting who we are in relation to who they are. Connections enrich our lives and foster our growth. If we isolate ourselves, we are in fact denying ourselves.

Community is a shared human experience. We seek inclusion with groups and are drawn to make connections with, and to feel accepted by, others. According to Lieberman, feeling like one belongs to a community is essential to one’s mental well-being; “an individual's perception of having a reliable and accessible social network is more important in reducing stress than whether or not the network is actually used” (Lieberman, 1982). The lack of a sense of belonging can have additional negative effects: “Chronic loneliness and isolation impair cognition,
emotion, behaviors, and physical health for a variety of reasons, whereas good social relationships are a sign, a predictor, and a likely cause of good health“ (Kern, Della Porta, and Friedman, 2014).

In choosing our community, most of us are drawn to the familiar because of the comfort that comes with the understanding others have of us, and the understanding that we have of individuals and situations that we have interacted with and experienced before. Finding commonalities between individuals builds stronger connections; this helps to strengthen the community as a whole and also helps it to grow. Strength comes from connections from one individual to another and from one community to another. To some extent all communities are connected, by cross-links between individuals in different communities; human society is a vastly branching network.

Choosing one’s community due to an initial perception of commonalities can be a strength and a weakness; strength in making quick decisions and easy bonds between like-minded individuals, but weakness in overlooking or dismissing individuals due to a lack of full understanding. Using commonalities to judge the potential depth of a relationship with another can be a strength for finding friends and associates on whom one can rely. If there are enough perceived commonalities, such as similar personalities or common interests, we can empathize with and encourage one another. It can be a weakness if, by jumping to conclusions, one preemptively dismisses another person, and consequently there is not an opportunity to accurately perceive the quantity of commonalities. For example, due to a miscommunication between individuals, a conflict arises, and two individuals -- who actually have quite a few commonalities -- gain the impression that their personalities are incompatible, or that the individuals have conflicting goals with one another. Instead of pausing to examine the situation
as a whole, or trying to understand the perspective of the other person, one might find it easier to make assumptions and write off the other person as different, and therefore not accepted into one’s community, and therefore not extended as much patience or compassion.

How we view the world, our general mood, the hobbies we choose to fill our time, the location where we work, and how we categorize people and situations, and choose to react, tend to determine the individuals and groups that we are drawn to, who are drawn to us, and who we form communities with. Having those connections makes us more empathetic to those individuals, and thus in times of conflict we are usually more willing to try to understand rather than jump to conclusions. For example, when my sense of well-being or security is threatened (e.g., my ability to pay rent, buy food, or see the people I care about), I start to panic; I become loudly vocal and my hands shake. Most people might assume from those symptoms that I am angry, when in fact I am panicking and wanting to both literally and figuratively crawl out of my skin. Regardless of how my feelings are expressed, most people would understand and empathize with the feelings of threat and uncertainty that result when something threatens our sense of a safe living environment. This is one example of a commonality shared by most humans; however, if any two individuals were asked to find things that they have in common, this aspect might not be explicitly recognized. We often have more commonalities than we realize.

Through my work, I emphasize connections, to try to encourage people to recognize these connections and commonalities they might have with other people, thus making them more likely to work to understand each other, and more likely to try to avoid or mitigate unnecessary conflict or misunderstanding. Without assumptions to get in the way, one has more room to actually perceive and comprehend the other perspective. I highlight connections and
commonalities between individuals and/or communities, through the use of analogy, psychology, sociology, and organizational systems. The goal is to draw attention to those commonalities and to stress the importance of bonds between one another, even potential bonds through non-obvious commonalities that might otherwise be overlooked at first glance. I draw attention to these connections and commonalities in my thesis exhibition, through the physical analogy of the installation -- for communities and sub-communities, and how they are inextricably connected, regardless of the general grouping which is initially visible -- and through the content of the prints: images that highlight moments of community, or moments that many different individuals can relate to, images with clear body language and/or clear emotion. These moments have an overlay of the connections created and shared within their communal groups.

BACKGROUND, FOUNDATIONAL

I have always had an interest in finding connections between seemingly incompatible things -- opposing political views, scientific ideas, dieting choices, etc. The long and meandering path between two opposing points is fascinating to explore. Some of the most fascinating of these paths are those between individuals; those paths are also the most satisfying to discover. I am not drawn to the differences, but rather to how they connect.

I have never liked conflict. When I was a little girl, sometimes I would sing songs or act silly in an effort to distract people from a quarrel. My efforts to quell quarrels continued into my teen years; I usually played the peacemaker between friends when conflicts arose. As I grew in age and maturity, I saw the value in not only trying to resolve specific conflicts, but in helping to
find commonalities and build connections between other people, to help prevent conflicts from
starting. In college I explored interests in the arts and humanities, and I began to search for
commonalities on deeper and broader levels. I compared stories from different cultures, and
personal journeys across generations. There are so many common themes throughout life, such
as familial bonds, raising one’s young to survive on their own, pride in one’s heritage, and the
impulses to create and cultivate. There are many aspects of life that can be shared; many tasks
and experiences can be easier, more beneficial, and/or more enjoyable when we work together.
Why should we waste our time on petty misunderstandings? I am not suggesting that all conflict
or misunderstanding is removable from society. The idea of total peace on earth is unrealistic; in
the real world there is too much greed, corruption, and selfish ambition. Even if the elements of
greed, corruption, and selfish ambition were somehow magically removed from society, a
conflict-free society would still be impossible. Hardships such as illness, loss, or resource
shortfalls can lead to stress and short tempers. Everyone is composed of the same chemical
elements, and many of the same physical and mental elements, but these inputs can create a wide
variety of outputs for both physiology and personality. Just as we are physically similar but
individually unique, most people share fundamental aspects of human experience, but have
individually unique lives and personalities.

We seek emotional connections; we seek knowledge; and we seek things that make us
feel, but when we feel too much, we look for ways to escape or dampen those feelings. We all
encounter things that reinforce or challenge our worldviews. When we lose people we care
about, or face trials, or experience other negative situations, we feel anger, frustration, and pain.
When we find individuals who encourage us, and whom we can encourage, we build
connections. Gathering with those we care about can bring comfort, happiness, and reassurance.
My family is tight-knit, for this, I consider myself fortunate, and for most of my life they were always nearby. Like most families, we have had our share of conflicts, but we always sat down at the table for dinner together, and we supported one another when it really counted. On special holidays we have a huge gathering of extended family whenever finances and schedules permit; my sisters and I found over time that my father’s cousins, aunts, and uncles had become our cousins, aunts, and uncles. I lived at home with my parents during my undergraduate education; I was always close to home. Until a few years ago, I did not fully appreciate what a huge role my family played in my life; I did not understand how those hundreds of annoying parental questions -- about where I was going, who I would be with, and when I expected to be home -- were an unacknowledged assurance that I was cared for and that I had people who would be there for me no matter what.

When I finally moved away from home, to Missoula, MT, a twelve-hour drive away, I felt completely isolated from all the friends and family that had always been so close. In the first five months after I moved, I was in shock to the point where I self-isolated and would go days without speaking to anyone. Although I could easily contact the people I cared about, I felt like I was alone and falling apart. It was during this time that I realized just how important my family was to me, and what a significant part they played in my feelings of community and connectedness. Day-to-day activities seemed almost impossible without the support I had always known; the distance made me feel completely isolated from my community, from family and friends and even long-time casual acquaintances, that had always been so close.

During this period of isolation, my interest in the idea of human interaction and community was heightened. I began research into neurotransmitters, and how they affect how people react to positive and negative situations. Neurotransmitters are chemical responses that
are sent to nerve or muscle fibers, or a similar structure, in response to a situation. Some examples of what they affect are: mood, sleep patterns, digestive process, heart rate, and fluidity of muscle contraction. Learning about the functions and effects of these chemicals in the human brain and the physiological neural network helped me to understand how a person’s support system or social network can be more vital to their daily functioning than they might believe, that it can have a positive or negative trickle-down effect on many aspects of their physiology and life. Drawing these analogies helped me to process the changes in my own life, and how they affected my emotional well-being and my ability to cope with stress.

I also studied human interaction: not just through the words we speak, but through our intonation and body language, and through the things and ideas which we choose to focus on or omit. I discovered how community and experience impact how an individual processes these forms of communication. The idea of this “learned lens” was the focus of my Bachelor of Fine Arts print show: the idea that who you are and how you interact with the world is influenced by the physiological DNA inherited from your parents, by the ideas that they teach you and the ideas that they have learned from their parents, by the geographical environment that you are born into, by your friends, by the people you encounter, etc.

We strengthen and weaken communal connections every day, but they are always present: an interconnecting web of moments in time, of bridges burned, of groceries purchased, of babies born, of illnesses battled. These moments are full of richness, and they branch out in all directions. I highlight some of the common aspects of life that many people share, and the interrelatedness and shared human experience of different communities. I use these shared elements to reiterate the importance of belonging to a community, and the fundamental human
need to feel like a productive and valued part of it, and how this is essential for one’s mental consonance and well-being.

My recent work, outside of my thesis show, focuses on examining families, biological families and chosen families, which form the critical foundation of my community. As I learned, when a person feels distant from their community, the brain responds to the sense of isolation and the loss of cherished communal interactions. Eisenberger and Lieberman, (1997) concluded from various studies that “the capacity for social exclusion to cause social pain and decrease self-esteem might be so powerful that simply viewing a scene that bears a resemblance to rejection produces these effects.” She found that even if an individual was aware that they were in control of whether or not they interacted with a community, the parts of the brain that react to physical pain would react, just as they would for any form of social rejection, perceived or actual.

Since art helps me to convey a wide variety of concepts or thoughts, I chose to work with printmaking and installation to help others and myself to sort out feelings about personal connections, and to explore the commonalities between different communities and individuals. “Through creativity and imagination, we find our identity and our reservoir of healing. The more we understand the relationship between creative expression and healing, the more we will discover the healing power of the arts” (Stuckey, and Nobel, 2010). Through my thesis work I can help people to recognize connections and commonalities they might have with other people through fundamental bonds, thus making them more likely to understand each other, and to process their own communal links. Through the imagery I use, I can incorporate their images and memories into my work, honoring my community members who are geographically absent, and making the distance between us feel lessened.
BACKGROUND, ARTISTIC AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Today I am a printmaker and an installation artist. However, my pursuit of the arts began with an interest in ceramics. When I first decided to pursue an undergraduate art degree, I focused on ceramics, because I loved the tactile process of wheel throwing and carving clay, and I still do. In one of my required art classes, I was introduced to printmaking; before that point I had never given it any thought, but it quickly became the new focus of my artistic passion. As much as I loved making ceramics, I came to love printmaking even more. It is a systematic process, which can be meditative, and it was also much easier for me to successfully share my ideas through printmaking. Since I could not devote as much time to printmaking as I wanted to and still pursue ceramics, I chose to focus on printmaking.

I did not always identify as an installation artist. Even though I had taken an installation class in undergraduate school, I had little free time or interest for anything outside of printmaking. It was not until a couple years ago that I was reminded of how much I enjoyed installation art and how much I enjoyed the immersive qualities of it, and began to relate to it for conveying my ideas almost as much as with printmaking. In *The Space Between Points and Their Navigational Reference* I used both of these types of art, because I believe my ideas are better conveyed to the viewer through a combination of art that is observed (prints) with art that is experienced (installation).

I find the blurred line between life and art alluring; I enjoy evoking a particular feeling to create an experience for, and to engage with, the viewer. Depending on the individual, the viewer may find it more approachable to process an artwork that they can experience with multiple senses, rather than one they can only look at. A physical experience can engage sensory memory.
This is why I combine installation with printmaking: I can communicate ideas using the visual impact of the prints and the physicality of the installation.

However I combine printmaking with other forms of art, it is still my preferred art form and the one that most strongly engages my artistic passion. I enjoy how the steps in the process can be very organized, working through one step before moving on to the next. Each layer of the print needs to be added in a specific order, and each additional layer adds meaning to the overall image; the information is incomplete until the last layer is laid down, everything slowly comes together as information is added. In working with these systems, I can also have freedom to easily incorporate multiples and repetition. I use repetition to create pattern and visual organization, and to create more of a visual impact.

There are specific artworks that have influenced me during the creation of my own art. Some of the artworks I relate to conceptually -- Yoko Ono, Matthew Ritchie, and Angela Bulloch. Some I relate to visually -- Judy Pfaff -- and others I relate to both visually and conceptually -- Zhang Xiaogang and Chihiro Shiota.

**Zhang Xiaogang** is a contemporary Chinese symbolist and surrealist painter. I conceptually relate to the work of his series *Bloodlines*. In this series, he begins with family portraits and creates paintings to portray the experiences of his immediate family during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Each painting has a red line incorporated into the composition, representing bloodlines and inescapable fate. *Big Family No. 3* (Figure 1) is from the series *Bloodlines*.

This painting is similar to the prints in my exhibit -- through the red line overlaying images of family and how it mirrors the silhouettes overlaid on my prints of family (see 2014, Figure 2). The lines in my prints also relate to the connections made between individuals and
how these connections are bound to those of their ancestors and their past: connections between one another and the influences they have had. I am also drawn to the contrast of emotion between Xiaogang’s *Bloodlines* series -- where emotions are covered by a masked expression -- and the prints in my thesis exhibit -- where I intentionally chose images that mostly portray individuals with open expressions.

Figure 1. Zhang Xiaogang, *Big Family No. 3*, 1995

![Figure 1](image1.jpg)

Figure 2. Darla Pienciak, 2014, 2020

![Figure 2](image2.jpg)
Judy Pfaff is an installation artist, sculptor, painter, and printmaker. Pfaff does not accompany her works with any narrative or statement of meaning, but instead builds each artwork as a unique construction in space and lets it speak for itself. Pfaff and I both work with printmaking and installation art, but I am drawn more to her dynamic use of installation art than to her prints. I am most inspired by her works from 1993 and 1994: *Moxibustion* (Figure 3), *Cielo Requerdo* (Figure 3), and *Corpo Onbrosso* (Figure 4). Each work is a chaotic tangle of lines that comprise a root-like network; within seeming chaos, we can find connections and structure. These works allude to roots visually, while my work alludes to roots both visually and conceptually, regarding a person’s communal roots and the connections that person makes throughout their lifetime.

Figure 3. Judy Pfaff, (Left) *Moxibustion*, 1994, (Right) *Cielo Requerdo*, 1994
Matthew Ritchie works in multiple art forms including installation, painting, performance, sculpture, and video. He works with the idea of the accidental or chance encounter, and whether one individual can increase the randomness of the world. Focuses of his work include taking the art of drawing from a two-dimensional presentation into a three-dimensional, physically navigable space, and contrasting the randomness of chance encounters with the predictability of architecture. His goal is to introduce and highlight randomness and chaos within systematic architectural structures that are otherwise predictable and controlled.

I am particularly drawn to one of his artworks, *The Morning Line* (Figure 5), which uses specific and repeating building blocks to create a chaotic overall structure. One of the ideas conveyed by this work is human connectedness: everyone is a part of the same structure or continuum, and while everyone is connected in some way through the vast interlinked structure of human society, the entirety of that structure can be chaotic due to the wide variety of different individuals and different connections that comprise it. His approach to building structures is similar to how I view connections between individuals and communities. Though individual people, families, or other groups may have similar basic structures, there is a vast range of
possible ways in which they can connect, and there are few constraints on the growth of that connective structure. When describing his work, Ritchie discusses the more abstract idea of how our knowledge is defined by the structure of information we have acquired over the course of our lives, and how that structure, along with our biology, creates a framework that we carry with us. Similarly, my work also examines how our biological and social networks help to shape who we are and who we may become.

Figure 5. Matthew Ritchie, *The Morning Line*, 2008

**Yoko Ono** is a multimedia artist, performance artist, singer, songwriter, and peace activist. I enjoy a lot of her works, but her works that I most appreciate are *Wish Tree* (Figure 6), *Play It By Trust* (Figure 7), and *Ceiling Painting/YES Painting* (Figure 8). I appreciate the depth of the messages she conveys through uncomplicated means of engaging the viewer.

*Wish Tree* is exhibited in multiple locations around the world. In this installation, the visitor is invited to write wishes on cards and hang them on a tree; after the exhibition period closes, these cards are sent to the artist, and she buries them at the base of Imagine Peace Tower.
in Iceland. This tower was built as a memorial for Ono’s late husband, John Lennon, and as a beacon for world peace. This collaborative work makes me think about the commonalities of human desires and how even though someone might never know these wishes, they are kept and treasured; although Ono might never meet the people who share their wishes, she is connected to them through her collection of the cards. She has fostered a literal and metaphorical community of wishes; as cards are added to the trees, the community grows, and the trees themselves seem to grow as well.

Figure 6. Yoko Ono, *Wish Tree*

Figure 7. Yoko Ono, *Ceiling Painting/YES Painting*, 1966
In *Ceiling Painting/YES Painting*, the word “yes” is printed on a ceiling tile in tiny letters, so small that the word is only readable when viewed through a magnifying lens, and which can only be viewed by ascending a ladder to the ceiling. This piece encourages visitors to, quite literally, work at finding an affirmation and a “positive” outlook. Analogously, it takes effort to understand other people and their perspectives, but it is well-worth that effort to find understanding rather than misunderstanding, and to reach an accord rather than conflict, to enjoy a positive outlook rather than being stuck in a negative one.

Another work, *Play It By Trust*, is a chess board set with all white chess pieces. By making the opposing pieces identical in appearance, Ono provokes questions such as why and how one could engage in conflict with an opponent that is identical to one’s self. As a metaphor for the futility of war, it highlights the absurdity of conflict between opponents with no meaningful differences, who are distinguishable only when they stand on either side of an artificial divide. I work with similar concepts in my own art, with the goal of encouraging people to recognize fundamental commonalities between each other. This kind of recognition can help people to be more willing to understand each other, or to come to a compromise to resolve a conflict.

Figure 8. Yoko Ono, *Play It By Trust*, 1966/2011
In these works, Ono fosters community and positivity, and highlights the absurdity of superficial conflicts between opponents who are fundamentally similar. In a way, these works aim to uplift and encourage people toward optimism and understanding of one another. My work has similar aims, to highlight positive connections and to encourage people to find commonalities and work toward understanding one another.

**Angela Bulloch** shows a fascination with systems, patterns, and rules in her artwork. *Betaville* (Figure 9) consists of a bench placed in front of a wall, where an automated device begins painting vertical and horizontal lines across a patch of wall as soon as someone sits on the bench. “[Its] aesthetic creation became an anonymous and at the same time collective process, because in the course of the exhibition unnamed people sat down on the bench” (Becker, Frangenberg, Gohlke, Hess, Lehmann, Liebs, Loffler, Montmann, Simpson, Stange, and Wege, 2001). The sense of whimsy in the randomly drawn lines and the immediate visual impact of the

Figure 9. Angela Bulloch, *Betaville*, 1994
viewer’s influence are paralleled in my installation *Rhizomatic* (Figure 10), where connections can be formed and broken, and networks are rearranged, if the viewer moves through the tangled groups of string. Although the viewer is not explicitly invited to interact with the installation through signage, they are subtly invited into the space by generous open sections of the installation they can easily move through.

Figure 10. Darla Piencjak, back view *Rhizomatic*, 2020

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**Chiharu Shiota** is a Japanese installation artist who has lived and worked in Berlin since 1996. Her works address life, death, and relationships using a variety of visually simple but emotionally complex metaphors. The majority of her installations consist of collections of objects and a multitude of strings. In relation to my work, two of her works stand out in particular: *Where Are We Going?* (Figure 11) and *The Key In Hand* (Figure 12).

*Where are We Going?* visualizes the ultimate question of the journey of life, both
individually and collectively. Everyone, in their own boat, is on a journey to an unknown destination; but our connections to each other give us points of reference. My exhibit also visualizes life journeys, in a way that focuses on specific moments throughout those journeys, but also emphasizes the spaces between those moments. There are shared commonalities between all journeys, regardless of destination.

Figure 11. Chiharu Shiota Where Are We Going, 2017

Figure 12. Chiharu Shiota, The Key in The Hand, 2015

In The Key in The Hand, Shiota visualizes a vast network of memory in the form of keys strung together with string; the keys were collected from people all around the world, each having their own inherent associations. Similar to how each key in Shiota’s installation is
associated with various specific memories, and how viewers have their own varying associations with keys, viewers of my exhibitions have varying associations with the moments in time portrayed in the images in the prints. We might not all have the same response to a given image, but we can relate to the moment and the connections represented in that image. Through their connections to the keys, the network of strings in Shiota’s work represents connections between associated memories, people, or locations. In my own work, the strings represent literal individuals and moments in time, which collectively form communities and shared memories, where the image points to something specific -- going to the beach with your family, childhood friends, etc. The installation points to an idea of the connections between unspecified things, and the clusters that they form through their existence.

**EXHIBITION**

This exhibition consists of an installation, *Rhizomatic*, and a series of screen prints, which are titled based on the year that the original photograph was taken. The exhibit draws attention to community and to connections between people and remembered moments that highlight those connections. I do this to draw attention to common human experiences, to encourage people to make an effort to understand others rather than allow superficial differences to create conflict. I chose images that represent life events and interpersonal moments to which many different individuals can relate, images with clear body language and/or clear emotion.

This exhibit focuses on the community of my biological family, although family is not just biological -- it can be chosen: spouses or close friends. The images in the prints are all from moments at least six years past; they are temporally distanced from the present. An individual
may feel a sense of yearning when they feel distanced from their community. Eisenberger suggests that people react so negatively to social separation, or perceived distance, because “the pain mechanisms involved in detecting and preventing physical danger were co-opted by the more recently evolved social attachment system to detect and prevent social separation” (1997). There is a perceived separation when there are differences, or a lack of commonalities. I have found that it is easier to build community by focusing on commonalities or similarities.

Through focusing on fundamental human commonalities, I aim to encourage others to recognize connections and commonalities they might have with other people, which can make them more open to understanding, and more likely to try to avoid or mitigate conflict. Any one person will share commonalities with any other person, whether through culture, education, interests, or something as foundational as love for family. Everyone needs strong bonds to others for their psychological well-being. Within a community, more bonds and stronger bonds give strength to the community as a whole, and also lend strength to the individual. Strength comes from the center of one’s being and reaches outwards through community, composed of individuals linked to others, finding commonalities and growing stronger together. Community is the foundation of our strength.

This exhibition addresses not just one community or one individual, even though it is full of images of my family; the work speaks of shared facets of human experience that can be found in more than just biological family. At some point or another we have all been distanced from our communities, either geographically, emotionally, or through death. Distance can help one to be more aware of the impact of their community on their lives. In the last couple years, my geographical distance from my own family helped to magnify my appreciation of those bonds. In using such a universal concept as family, I hope to find a way to relate to every viewer and
inspire a willingness to try to understand each other, as connections to family are something we can all relate to.

**Installation**

The installation is titled *Rhizomatic*. The term “rhizomatic” refers to a philosophical concept, developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, which considers history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis. With no beginning or end, the “rhizome” exists always in the middle or in between things; it resists chronology and organization. Similar to the rhizome, familial connections and other communal connections have no beginning or end, and they contain a wide array of attractions and influences, these types of familial connections can be seen in the varying densities of clusters of twines: individuals and moments.

Communities are a critical component of our lives, they impact how we choose to interact with those around us, and fit into our society. I created *Rhizomatic* (Figure 13) to represent communities, and to express how bonds between individuals and communities are constantly strengthening and weakening, branching out, being formed and being broken. Taking inspiration from varying visuals -- tree root systems, family trees, bloodlines, and the branching system of a banyan tree that I saw in Hawai’i (Figure 13) -- I created a similarly branching system of strings, which represents the interconnectedness between different individuals and communities. The strings comprise a larger structure that viewers can be enveloped by, pass through, and interact with. This also illustrates how interacting with one string or individual can affect the strings or individuals that connect to it.
The installation is composed of thousands of feet of colored twine. The twine was dyed in different shades of red, black, and gray, using diluted screen printing ink. The same kind of ink was used to create the imagery on the prints in the other portion of the exhibit. Most of the ink that I used to dye the twine was very viscous and dry; it could no longer be used in screen printing. I dismissed the idea of using natural dyes to dye the twine because I preferred the visual effect that the twine had, after being dyed with screen printing ink, as opposed to natural dyes. I also have years of experience with mixing printmaking inks to the exact colors that I want, where I have very little experience using and mixing natural dyes. Even though the process of dying the twine with screen printing ink was more time consuming than other methods, I wanted the same material to be used in both parts of the exhibition -- prints and installation.

The red color refers to bloodlines and biological family. We are each influenced by our genetic makeup, by who our parents were, and by our birthplaces. The gray and black strings in the installation provide visual depth and contrast amidst the red strings. The color choice is in reference to dried out, or sickly, blood, and is a metaphor for the negative connections and interactions that we experience in our lives. The negative lends context to the positive, and gives
contrast, making us more grateful for the positive things that we experience and enriching our enjoyment of them.

The material choice of jute twine is due to a combination of factors: first and foremost, this rough-textured twine bristles with small fibers that tend to catch on things around it, especially other strands of twine; this tendency reminds me of how humans have a natural tendency to reach out, literally and figuratively, to form connections with other humans. Twine is also a humble material that is not elegant in any way, and is generally used for practical things, such as gardening. Gardening is a process of growth and nourishment. Plants require cultivation, and some require outside support, such as twine, for their structures to not collapse on themselves, or in order for them to reach greater heights than their structural integrity would allow on their own. The connections that the twine make helps to strengthen the plant. Similarly human connections require experiences, and similar cultivation and support. Throughout the installation there are various types of string groupings. Some of the groupings are closely bound, whereas others are tenuously hanging together. Some of the strings form few connections, and others form many on their meandering journey through multiple clusters.

Some of the connections create visual blockages which discourage the viewer to walk through them, where other sections can be more inviting. One of the more inviting sections include an alcove in the piece. Some of the central twine is more closely bound together (Figures 14 and 15), although the view of the top shows a more dispersed origin for the grouping. This tight grouping creates an absence surrounding it. Although there is no signage explicitly stating viewer interaction, the alcove in the strings is meant to invite the viewer into the space. This contrasts the blockages of the portions of denser connections; the void is inviting the viewer in to fill the space, to make the communities of strings more complete, more whole, with the inclusion
of others. Kern has found that “several core areas of life combine to promote physical health, subjective well-being, social relationships, and related factors that together represent the flourishing life.” (2014) Since belonging to a community, social relationships, and feeling like a productive part of it, subjective well-being are important for happiness, wouldn’t it make sense to work toward creating harmony with one another, instead of adding to the dissonance? This installation is meant to indirectly point out the power that we all have in our ability to create, weaken, or sever communal bonds, and how even though we appear to be separate from some communities, we are all inextricably connected with one another.

Figure 14. Top: alcove and tightly knit connection in Rhizomatic, 2020

Figure 15. Detail of the top of the tightly knit connections in Rhizomatic, 2020
Prints

The strings are accompanied by a series of large-scale prints where connections between people are literal, and have an overlay of the silhouettes, of the connection between the twines in *Rhizomatic*, in a way that is tangible, but not overwhelming to the image. The moments portrayed in the images in the prints -- family celebrations, bonds between siblings, a mother bonding with a new child, and connections to grandparents or ancestors -- can provoke common feelings or memories. These moments can remind the viewer of their own moments, and these commonalities can make us more willing to work to understand one another and find ways to compromise or mitigate conflict. The images captured moments from my family, both moments that I experienced and moments that had happened before I was even a possibility. The images go back as far as my grandmother as a young girl, with her twin sister (1939, Figure 20), which alludes to childhood and friends. The print portrays two young girls standing, facing the camera and holding hands. There is a clear bond between these two young girls. When we all were young, there probably was a friend or group of friends that we would hang out with, and share thoughts with. As we each continue through our lives we continue to have, and form new types, of these friendship bonds.

Other images in the prints portray births, weddings, family outings, and other celebratory times in life. They capture family moments with generally positive connotations. The moments captured in the prints are varied, but there are visual commonalities, not just the commonality of the overlay of the string silhouettes. For example, three of the prints have images of different newly married couples (Figure 17). Due to the style of clothing, the images may seem to all be older, but each couple is from a different generation. There is a subtle similarity which can be seen in the bride in each image. The bride, from each couple, is wearing the same dress. This
The Space Between Points and Their Navigational Reference

Figure 16. The Space Between Points and Their Navigational Reference

Figure 17. Darla Pienciak, (Left to right, three brides in the same dress) 1957, 1982, 2011

dress has been passed down, from an admired elder, to her daughter, and then to her granddaughter. This tie can remind viewers of a connection made that reaches across generations. It can remind one of a bond that they share with a different generation through the passing down of a physical item, or from the passing down of a tradition. The imagery in the prints shows individuals at various stages of their lives, from one’s first moments, to their youth, to being middle-aged, to the final decades of their lives. The images on the prints have a low resolution; the identity of the individuals in the images is not readily evident. The decreased
resolution is in order to give the prints more anonymity, and less specificity toward my family and the moments that specifically pertain to them. I do this to make it easier for the viewer to relate to the images in the prints, and not feel as if I am touring them through a photo album.

The silhouettes on the images, for the screen prints, mirror the string connections from the installation. This is to draw a connection between the communities of strings, which the viewer can interact with, and the stationary prints that highlight moments in time. The meaning behind the silhouettes of the strings is most easily perceived within the context of the exhibition as a whole, where they are accompanied by the *Rhizomatic*. Without the installation for context, the silhouettes on the prints still form visible layers of interconnecting lines. There is a clear veiling from the silhouettes, but they also form clusters and connections on the prints themselves.

The prints are titled based on the year that the picture was taken. If two were taken in the same year, then the second image would also have the month taken added to the year. The classification of the prints is very subtle because the years of the prints are not displayed in chronological order. The prints are placed in an order based on a visual organization, which is more true to how a memory tangent would proceed (Figure 18).

Figure 18. The distribution of prints in *The Space Between Points and Their Navigational Reference*
The prints, composed of just the trails and paths of interactions created during one’s life (Figure 19), are titled after birth years. In these prints, there is no image or specific moment being focused on. The focus is the entirety of one’s experiences, rather than a specific moment placed within the structure of many moments and connections, as seen in the other prints in the exhibition. These prints are named based on the birthdates of my grandmother (1937), my fiance (1987), my nephew (2016), and myself (1991). The titles are distributed based on the density of the string. The visual exception in these four prints is the print of my nephew. His print has an image on it, but this image is completely obscured by the silhouettes, it is not visible. Ronan has had fewer interactions in his life since he is still relatively young; he has met less individuals, and his connections are predominantly formed based on who he has met through his family. The connections that he makes now are much more heavily influenced by his immediate family than they will be once he begins his journey as an independent adult. His connections have an image in the background that is not decipherable. It is present, similar to how his family is present: influential, but not readily decipherable.

The exhibition is created to connect with as many individuals as possible, although it has a limited ethnic diversity because of who my ancestors are. The work holds a bonus layer for my
family, as we are each familiar with most of the individuals and stories surrounding each photo in the prints. Although the average viewer won’t glean the additional memories and associated emotions of the images, I wanted to gift my grandparents and parents with having them be in the majority of the prints. I have learned many things from them as I’ve passed through my life, and have received my genetic blueprint and foundation for how I interact with the world, and how I value the concept of family. These values have only grown as I’ve gotten older, especially in the past few years that I have been in graduate school.

Figure 20. (Left) Close up of 1939; (Right) View of 1937 from inside Rhizomatic

The prints have moments that portray gatherings where there are mostly happy connotations for the individuals in the image. There are moments that we latch onto for one reason or another. I still remember the first gift that I received from one of my own friends. When I look at the image of my grandmother holding hands with her sister (Figure 20), I don’t just see sisters, since there is nothing in that image pointing to a familial bond. I see two young friends, and it reminds me of my youth and the memories I made with my friends, the gifts I received and gave, the wasp stings, and the skinned knees, the bickering and the smiles. When I look at 1971 (Figure 21), I am reminded of beaches and sunburns. I am reminded of when I was young and someone older showed me how to do something, like throw a fishing line or dig a
deep hole in the sand. It shows a gathering of old and young spending time outside together. They are on an adventure.

Not all of the memories sparked from looking at the prints have to be positive; life isn’t all happy moments. For example, 2009 (Figure 21) brings mixed emotions for me. It shows the viewer a young woman holding a small child, presumably newly born. When I see this print, I see the personal memories I connect to them: I think of my nieces, one of whom is being held in the picture, and how they were born early. I’m reminded how my sister had complications during both of her pregnancies, and both times almost died, and how I worry that I’ll lose her during her next pregnancy. I think of the worry and nervousness at the beginning of the night, and the joy at the end of that day. The struggle and joy, in turn, make me think of others I know and their mixed experiences with pregnancy.

Figure 21. (Left) 1971; (Right) 2009
There is mostly joy in these images, but they can also bring mixed emotions. We all know that life is not just joy. We can all relate to knowing someone having a child, enjoying the sunshine, and memories with friends. People we know get married, but it does not always work out. We can understand the joy that people find, the pain of loss, and the hardships and beautiful moments that come with being alive.

CONCLUSION

In my journey as an artist over the last few years, my interest in the ideas of human interaction and community was heightened by the distance I felt between myself and my closest community, my support system of family and friends. Through this distance, and beginning graduate school, I experienced a lot of anxiety and depression. I was able to sort through some of these emotions, through my research and by incorporating the ideas into my art. In this time, I have researched human interaction, formation of identity, and happiness, in the context of psychology and neuroscience in the chemical responses in the brain, and in the general actions or thoughts that transpire. I focus on how our communities serve as support structures, and how inextricably bound our community is to our well-being. Since there is a certain level of interconnectedness between communities, I focus on moments that are likely to be shared, I do this in hope of helping people be more likely to try to avoid or mitigate conflict, because of an understanding of a similarity. Whether we choose to be selfish or generous, and if we choose forgiveness or mercilessness, can strengthen or weaken our bonds.
I emphasize commonalities for understanding -- not agreement -- understanding or empathizing with someone does not mean that you agree with or endorse their choices. I create art using an examination of our social networks and innate human commonalities. I draw connections through use of analogy, psychology, sociology, and organizational systems; I apply my understanding of these things to my choices of imagery and the overall visual impact of my artwork. I hope to help others more easily accept outside perspectives, by highlighting commonalities to encourage greater understanding between individuals, and less antagonism. I stress the importance of interpersonal bonds, and emphasize the aspects of life that many people have in common, as well as the interconnectivity and shared experiences of different communities and groups. This sense of belonging in a larger context is essential for one’s mental consonance and well-being. Mental resilience, and communal strength, comes from our connections: from our community, from the visible and invisible ties between each other.

In this exhibit, the non-abstract images focus on my own biological family. In a greater human context, I relate to the viewer through my selection of certain imagery. These images depict life events that many people have experienced, such as weddings, new children, and
family outings; they also depict body language that speaks of connections between the individuals in the images, connections based in family, friendship, camaraderie, and love. By using images of my own family, I also hope to remind viewers of their own familial connections.

Figure 23. 2014

In general, when you boil down to the fundamentals of what makes people tick, there are a lot of similarities and fewer differences; we should be able to find more reasons to work alongside one another than we can to justify a serious conflict. To encourage people to recognize some of those fundamental similarities, I focus on the bonds of family, a human concept that everyone can relate to in some way. Regardless of the strength or quality of a person’s bonds to their family, other bonds are constantly forming and changing as we interact with various individuals and communities. Any growth or change in the network of a person’s connections is built on the continuity of life experience and is rooted in the foundation of the past. These moments are like twines that connect people and moments together again and again. This can be seen in the interconnectivity of the twine, and in the overlapping silhouettes on the prints, both creating overlapping visual layers. It is also seen in the images on the prints. Moments of
connections, of friendship, of celebrations, and of connections through generations. The exhibition is a conglomeration of memories, moments, generations, and interactions. I hope that through it, the viewer will be reminded of their own memories (ideally the good ones) and be reminded of the common aspects of life, how we are all just trying to make our way through our existence with some measure of happiness and human connection. We share more commonalities than we usually realize.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


