

& SURFACE

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A Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Art in the Department of Printmaking of the Rhode Island School of Design

By
Adam Jaye Mickey Porter
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Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

Brian Shure, Graduate Program Director of Printmaking, Thesis Chair

Taylor Baldwin, Graduate Program Director of Sculpture, Thesis Advisor

Elizabeth Ferrill, Painting & Printmaking Coordinator at Anderson Ranch, Thesis Advisor

Leah Wolff, Adjunct Professor of Printmaking, Thesis Advisor

This book is dedicated to:
My mom for her constant artistic support
My dad for his pragmatism and advice
Brad for his neverending ability to encourage me
Lizzy for always believing in me, even when I did not
My professors and peers who helped me find my way

“The world and Being hold together only in movement; it is only in this way that all things can be together.” - Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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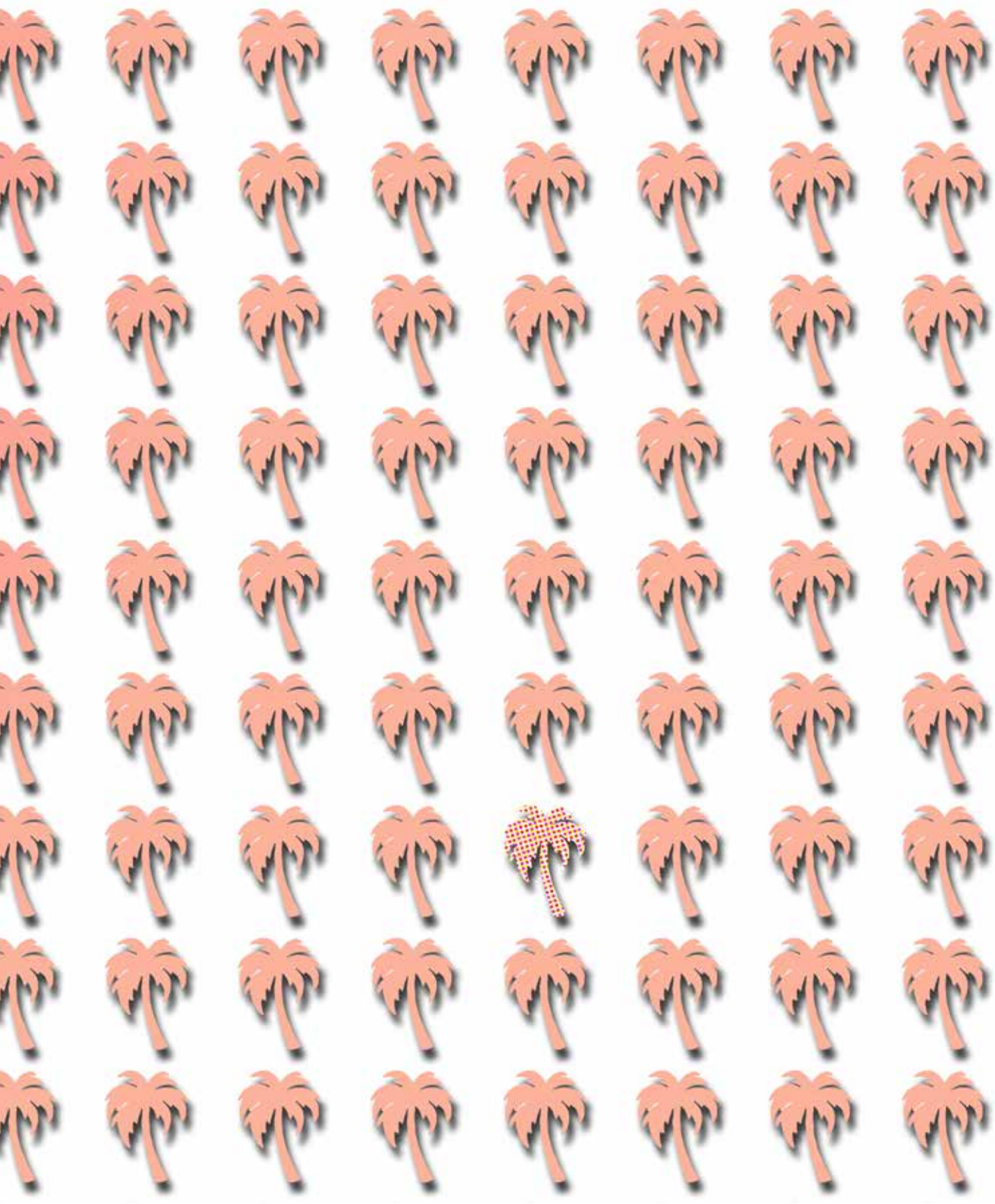
Drawing

Pattern

Thesis Abstract

I synthesize nature, night clubs, computer screens and sexual fantasies into an experience that interrupts desire and longing. Fractured elements culled from pornographic magazines, mediation from digital media, and surface tension enable optical and phenomenological effects that make the visible and invisible co-exist together. Moire patterns, strobing lights, iridescent paint, prismatic and flickering bits of visual information pull the picture plane apart. A dialectic process that cannibalizes all content and material, sparing nothing from revision. The nature of material, imbued with it's own history and beauty is transformed, yielding a surface that holds an image and after-image all at once - to be both explicit in it's material nature, confusingly layered, and pictorially problematic. I collage these disparate sources and elements together, seeking a sense of beauty that aims to be both sublime and phenomenological.





FLASH

It isn't that it isn't clear or that I am trying to recreate it, rather it is something that, like a prayer I return to when I am stressed. When out of breath or frustrated I remember it, it comes to me sometimes like a soft breeze, other times like a blast of sunlight from a shade abruptly pulled open. At this point I've given up trying to figure out what it means or give it any real explanation, but it sticks with me and shakes me to my core. Most people's first memories are of something traumatic, like saying goodbye to a loved one or scuffing their knee from a slight fall. Mine is so simple, so quiet I don't really remember much sound to it at all.

I was in the back of a little carrier cart, being pulled by my Mom or Dad as they ride their bicycle. I remember reclining, it was a bright and warm mid-spring day. Riding along on a street we passed under a corridor of trees, with their leaves full and new. I am looking up at the sun, passing through the leaves. I don't recall how old I was. The light that filtered down, through the leaves gave them an illuminating presence that seemed so perfect, so synchronized. This motion of being pulled forward, with the flurry of glittering sunlight and illuminated neon-chartreuse, fluttering leaves has stuck with me. If there is anything that I believe in it is that memory, that image.

MEMORY



Early 90's teal blue and ochre – sandy haired form
your tall and broad shoulders (totally not blonde hair)
I climb your limbs
to find what was
raw

and bare in me
that drew me to you
magnetic
along that tan and
faded-sun-bleached-pale-yellow wall
along the stucco exteriors and
empty billboards

waiting for the tangerine glow of the sunset
up on Sunset

No hazy, misty gradient could
compare to your face drawn
in crimson neon lights from
the passing cars as we drive away
leaving you behind

Oh, Kay







STUD

I can never remember my own name,
until you late night
half-asleep call it out
in humid ecstasy

and no amount of flesh,
raw and taunt can pushing on me
me into it,
can push out your absence
which weighs heavy as a hill
I walk up alone (those dewy, red red bricks giving no traction in the late evening) every
night
and I'm thinking of the cold, snowy lake that holds you at bay
and that bay even further that
with its own grand old hills and golden gates
holds you in chains
ones you, like a craigslist ad
requested.





FANTASY

At this point I am not even sure how it really started, or how it will end. Lust, desire and encountering a hunger for flesh was something that clarified so much for me so early, but those adolescent yearnings were dulled by the sharp sense of my own body and my undesirability to others. So I mused about the world, letting my mind drift into realms of dragons and magic, a reservoir for social interaction and fulfillment. I idled through by throwing myself into fantasy realms.

In college, as an outlet for the rigorous figure drawing we had to do I started to drawing large, floating orgies. A playful excursion into something that I had only seen played out on the small screen of my computer, late at night. No, certainly orgies didn't happen. They existed in the proto-real land of pornography, most sex existed for me in this way, something to watch through a screen. While most of my friends had been sexually active at the young age of 14, I was bound to wait until I was almost 20.

Then life changed, I was used to being on the outside, spending my time riding my bike aimlessly around abandoned factories, wandering in a haze through meadows and train tracks under the summer sun. I spent a summer stuffing condoms and lube into packets for the local men's health clinic. In a few weeks I have put together over 2,000 packets. There was a gay softball tournament in town. I was invited out, in the curious hope that I would participate in the bacchanal I was peripherally participating in, but I abstained. I wandered the shores of Lake Michigan listening to music and staring at the water.

It wasn't until the following year that I was pulled into a world that had been envisioned in contour, tentatively played out through drawing. The once flat, articulated lines, cutting negative space into perfect bodies I could control and arrange, were suddenly sprawled out around the room. No longer did these bodies have the ability to be swiped away by an eraser, they were connected to people with pasts, they didn't smell of charcoal and mineral spirits, but of sweat and alcohol. A rampaging reality that once entered seemed to stalk me, following me down dark alleys and tinting the world like a gaseous pane of colored glass. It was as curative as it was terrifying, a sweet promise that my insecurities, my short comings, my failings would dissolve in the pulsing rhythm of other people's lust.





At Least He's
Pretty





LIGHT

The midwest had an obsessive fascination for all things SoCal in the 90s and early 2000's. I can't really pin point what it was about southern California that garnered this attention, but I remember many of my peers talking about the skate boarding culture, Tony Hawk, the beaches, and the glamour. I honestly didn't know where L.A. was on a map until I was about to move there as an adult. I do remember the lean, muscular and tan bodies of the Abercrombie & Fitch ads; the shiny, sun-bleached, frosted tips of the models in PacSun stores where I would occasionally shop for baggy cargo shorts, never understanding the climate and era they referenced. My goal was to get out of Indianapolis, preferably to Chicago or New York. I considered myself a nerd growing up, coolness was something from which I was categorically exempt. L.A. was for models, acting, and the buff, blonde, bimbos of billboards.

Moving there was tough, I had moved to Milwaukee for my undergraduate studies. In high school I spent a lot of free time exploring abandoned buildings. I had an odd affection of the post-rust belt collapse that left a playground of barbed wire waiting to be cut and explored. Milwaukee was the perfect balance of just far enough away from my parents, while offering a super authentic, grungy factory vibe. This was also in 2006, just before the "let's turn all these old factories into condos for yuppies with freshly-minted law degrees". So the decision to move to L.A. was really predicated on my boyfriend's desire to move there. He had been a model for a few years and promised that it was a big enough city to give me the artistic stimulation I needed - I was skeptical. My doubt

was overridden by my extreme exhaustion of the small city-mindedness of Milwaukee and it's long, cold winters; so palm trees it was.

The first few months of living in Los Angeles were terrible. I worked extremely hard in undergrad, double majoring and leaving with almost straight A's. I was a prolific artist and was eager to enter into a conversation about contemporary art. The problem was I also hated driving, and L.A. is a city of hedges and roads – all the good art was hidden from view and hard to find. I applied to dozens of jobs and everything was a no. I'm not sure if it was the lack of retail experience or the lack of having a headshot for an entry level position but the failure was maddening. Eventually I landed a job working for the largest gay porn company in the world – Channel 1 Releasing. My boss was Chi-Chi LaRue along with several other pornographic directors. It was seedy, it was loud, and it was demeaning but not in the way I imagined it would be. I had no problem with the porn playing non-stop in the store, nor did I have any problem playing up the benefits of any particular dildo or lube. It was dealing with the tired, old queens of porn directors grasping onto some false sense of privilege. I was also routinely annoyed with the attitude that the porn directors, boy toys would throw my way, I didn't need their shade. I had no interest in acting or modeling, adult or otherwise – so their condescending comments to me being “fresh” or “midwestern” were not welcome. The other shitty part was dealing with the porn stars. Interesting side note: most of their cocks look so large because they are so short. On average they are around 5 feet, 6 inches tall. Proportions play a big role in how one looks on camera. I never considered myself tall until I moved to California. I was now big enough to garner mean comments of being a tall, shop boy by the porn stars who would stop in for events or to show off to their sugar daddies. I was at a precipice – a lot of me was changing. I had been a late bloomer, growing from 5 foot at fifteen years old to finally reaching 6 foot by the end of college. I had also done a underwear run-way show for a small underwear company. Well, it was small at the time, it is now the premiere gay, pseudo lingerie underwear company – Andrew Christian. I was not fully aware of what I looked like yet and everyone in the porn business seemed to sense this insecurity and use it to bolster their egos.

In the midst of all this was a daily exploration of my neighborhood – West Hollywood. WeHo as it is known, is a pressure cooker of sexual energy. WeHo was - in 2011 and 2012 - what Chelsea was in the 90's: it was filled with attractive young men. Almost everyone was gay or in the arts in some way (mostly acting or modeling in L.A.) My daily walk to work included getting cruised, watching roid-ed out queens getting their morning coffee, and walking past the early shift Go-Go boys dancing in the bar windows; nothing sets the mood of the late morning sunshine like watching a twenty year old with a semi gyrate in see-through underwear.

Not everything revolved around sex though. The climate, the expansiveness of the city, its grid and history hidden in the shrubs all began to coalesce together in my mind. Eventually we made some friends and started to get invited to parties. One in particular stands out in my mind. We were out at the bars when our promoter/ go-go boy friend asked us to tag along to a party in the hills. It wasn't far so we decided to walk. L.A. nights are kind of magical, the warmth of the sun still emanates from pavement, and the plants seem more alive and open in the slightly dewy air. We go up a long, twisting road until we get to a stark, metal and glass house around a sharp bend overlooking a cliff. The party is littered with beautiful men, a pool stretched out over the backyard. The light from the pool, reflected and shimmered up, racing over the dark grass and then meeting the twinkling panorama of the basin beyond. A dazzling grid of light sprawled over the view from the house.

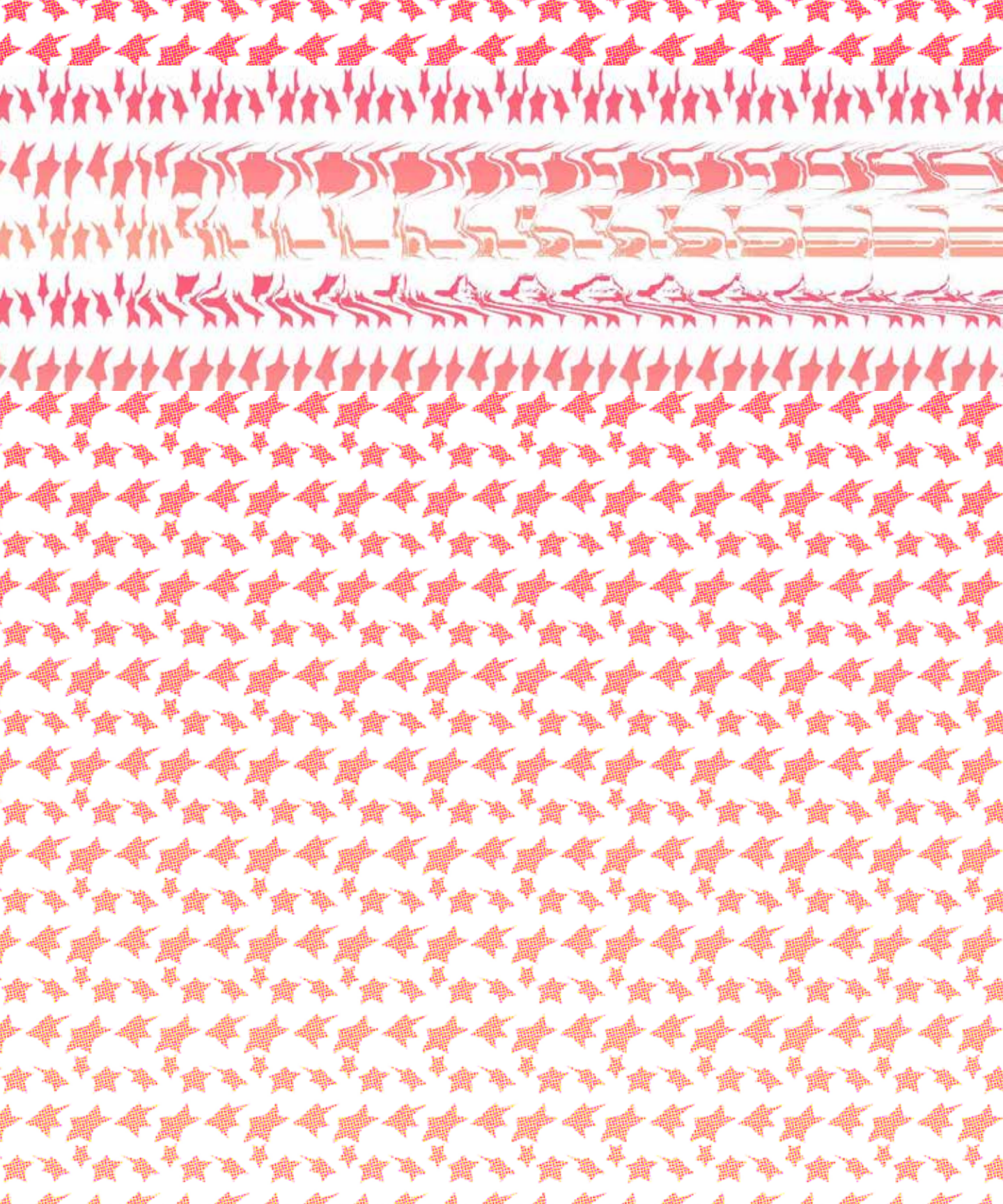
There was also a deep melancholy to the sun and to the creeping shadows of people who moved to L.A. hoping to get away from their problems and make it big. There is a suspension of time that seems to make everything static. I would often have a hard time remembering if I did something yesterday or three months ago. There were no seasons, no weather to mark events. It was only the slightest change in the angle of the sun, grazing over our pool that subtly tipped me off to the fact that time was even passing at all.

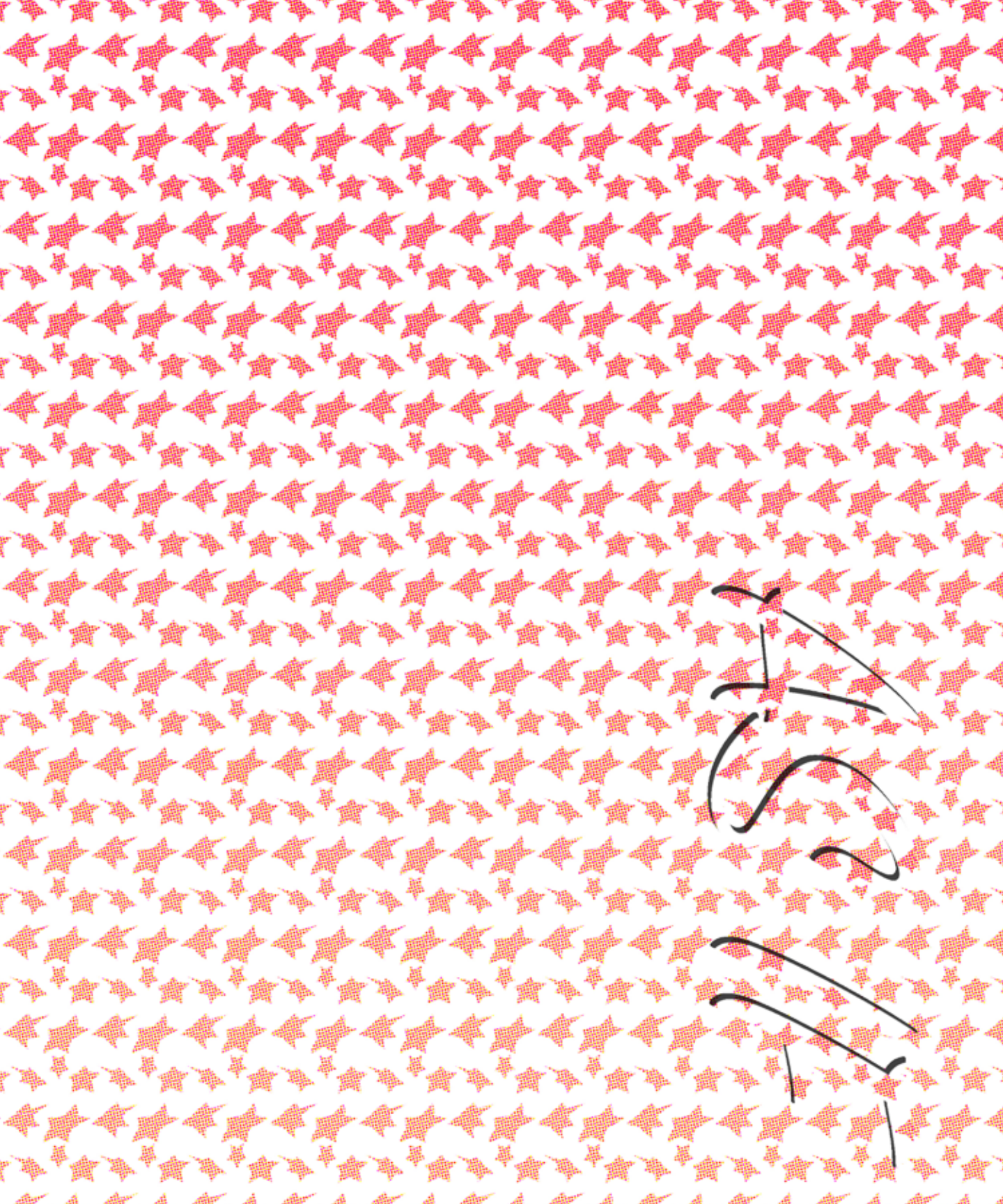
The most striking thing, the thing about L.A. that still holds with me is its ability to be sublime in its accumulative beauty, its innocuous yet explicit facade that reflected things in me that I never knew were there. The skyline, the streets, and the individual buildings in Los Angeles don't compare to Chicago or New York. It's only when, bored and gazing into the nothingness that the light of the sun over the ocean, the odd construction materials, the artificially nurtured vegetation, and the haze begin to form a collective image in my mind that embodies this surface-level paradise. Once that image was in my mind, it would overlay onto everything I saw there. Joey had a lot to do with this too. He was a lens that I saw myself and L.A. through. The streets, the boulevards, the nightclubs all began to seem like paper backdrops with excellent, angled lighting to a love story that none of us knew how to explain. Being in love with a place, with both of them - only worked because we couldn't verbalize it, because it crept over us like the smog that dissipates in the afternoon sun.





Pretti Bai







TTD

Time till dick

& I can never remember my own name, until you

late night

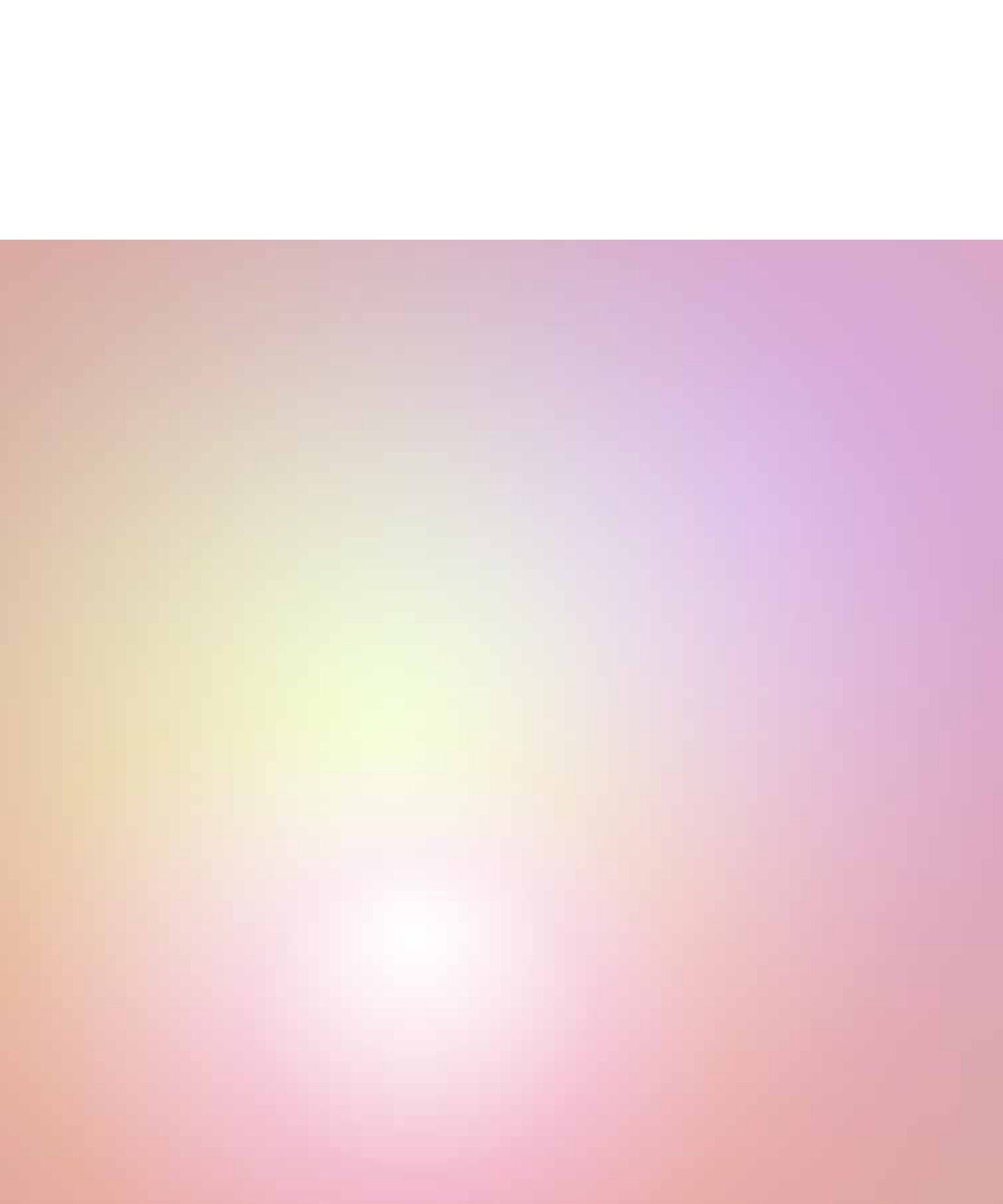
half asleep call it out,

in that humid ecstasy we both remember









SOENE

ARCHIVE

I was incredibly hung over. For some dumb reason - well many dumb reasons with names - I decided that before my day of visiting the Gerber-Hart Archive I would go out in Boystown with friends of mine. I can pin point the drink that pushed me over the edge, it was my third slushie at SideTrack – or maybe it was just the amount of sugar in the slushies that did me in. Either way I woke up early to try and sober up, so I could take the redline north to the Loyola stop and walk over to the library. I had emailed a couple of people there a few weeks earlier in hopes of getting a chance to scrounge through their collection of vintage gay bar posters.

After Sidetrack we went to Replay for a little; I had downed a few ciders there too. It was Marcus, and his need to end every night at Berlin that pushed me over the edge as well. Berlin is great though, a little nuts, but always a lot of crazy fun. If you want a place where there are equal odds you'll see someone smoking a joint in the bathroom or get bitten by an anonymous person while dancing, Berlin is for you. The DJ does tend to play a lot of Robyn or Kylie though, so at least the music is good. There always seems to be a point in every night that something clicks. It is like the right song comes in, everyone is at least three drinks in and bam, a collective rhythm is felt by the crowd. A shared pulse of light, a charge to the darkened air that makes the contrast of the room increase, like a subtle photoshop effect that renders everything both sharper and pixelated at the same time.

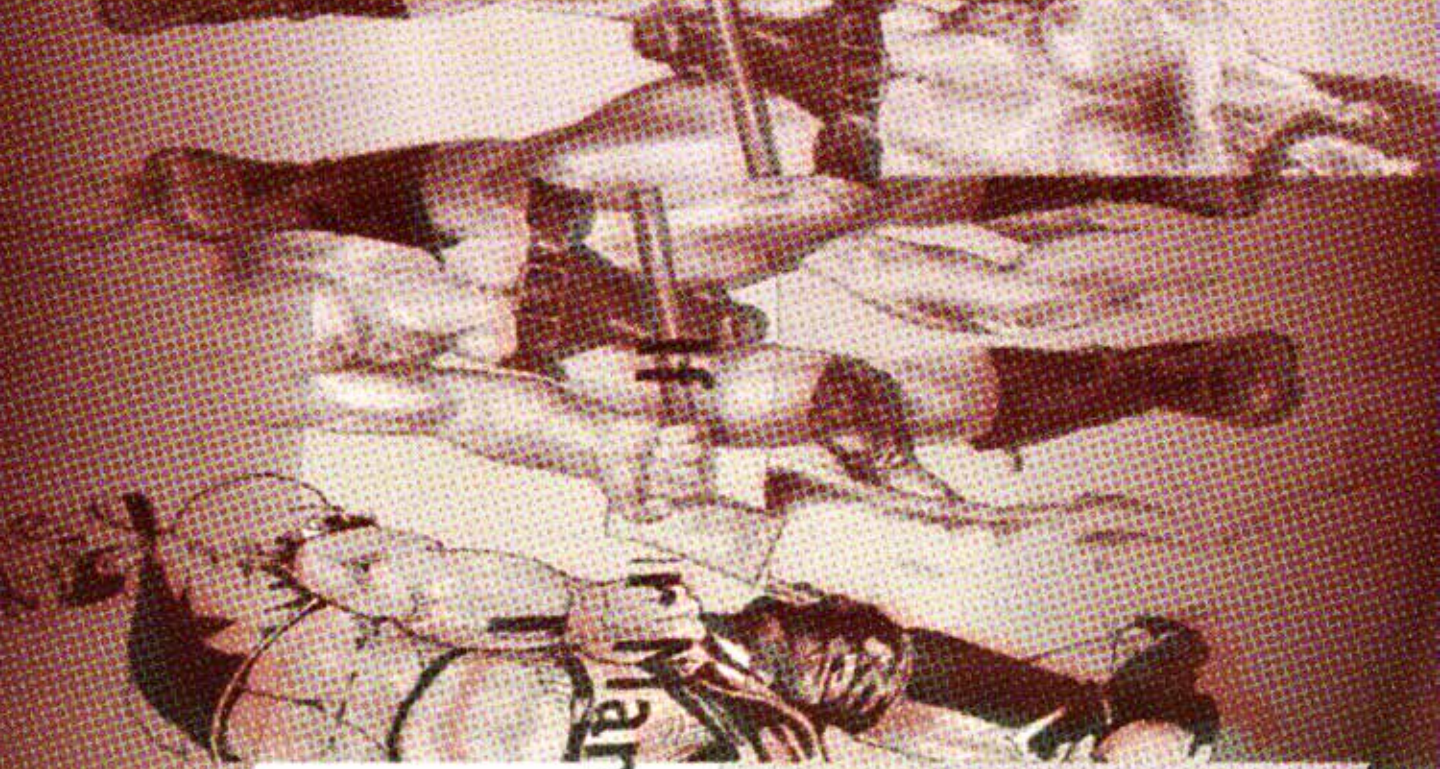
The next morning is always hell though. It was early January and between the wind and the cold sun, being outside was not idle for a bad hangover. I drugged out to the nearest L stop and waited for the train, luckily this station had heat lamps so I nestled under one. On the train I sat facing the lake, a thin veil of moisture was being pulled off the surface of the water. It was cold enough that this kind of ghostly effect happens but not cold enough for Lake Michigan to completely freeze over. The passing buildings and railing strobe together alternating dark and light views of the reflected sky on the surface of the lake. This pattern calms my mind slightly, dulling the throbbing ache in the back of my neck.

The library is an odd collection of gay and lesbian materials, housed in an unassuming brick building. The stacks and the accompanying librarian look like they were culled from the 1970's – apparently vintage lives. Their collection has yet to be digitized and was organized in large folders alphabetically. I am shown to a private viewing room and given “A” through “H” to start. I open the first folder and am confronted with a plethora of folded, torn and sun-bleached posters mostly advertising defunct gay bars and print posters – this is exactly what I was looking for. As I page through the material, I notice antiquated design motifs, an over abundance of type faces and something saccharine about how “loud & proud” these posters are. Paradoxically many of them are also inane and innocuous at first glance, the provocative content camouflaged into the design. I stand there, simultaneously trying to fight my hangover and trying to decipher a lexicon I am not familiar with. A language that - being gay - I should be able to read, but distorted and fractured, gets lost in translation. I can piece together the symbols but in doing so, a language is invented rather than shared.

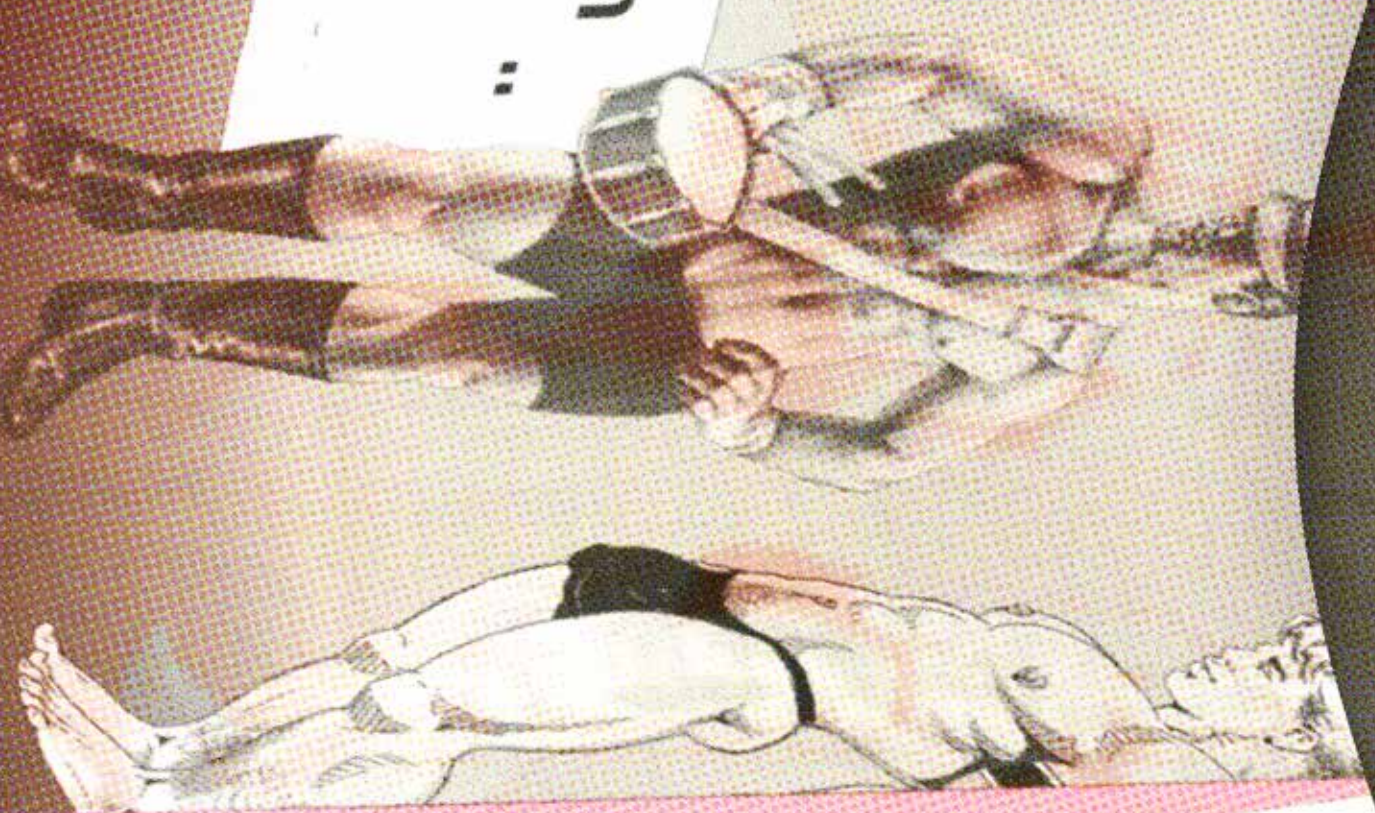






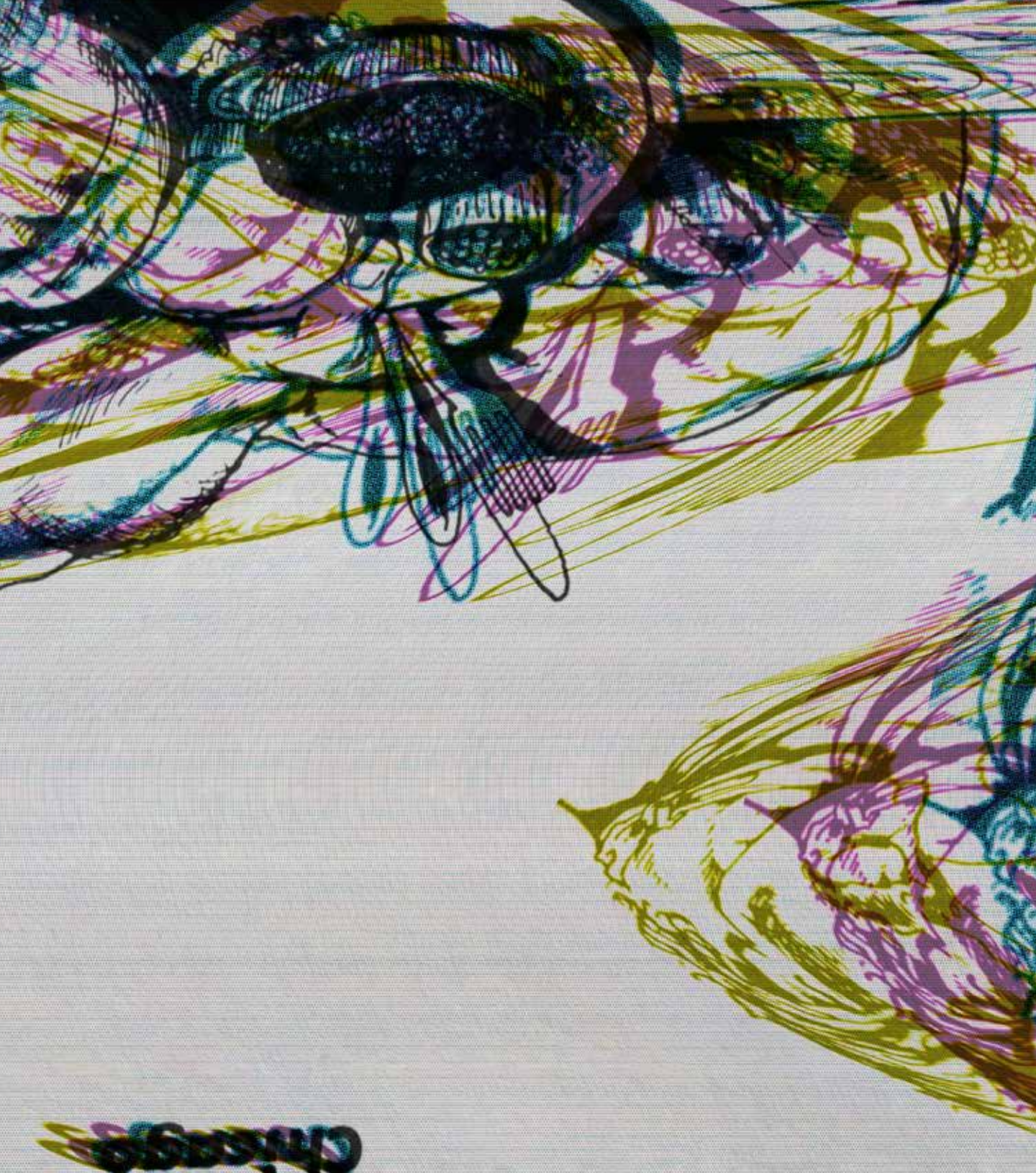


Man



With Benefits





MASC





DRAWING

Club Unicorn – like some sick, sad childhood dream co-opted into a dark cavern of jockstraps and disjointed electronic music. It was after we broke up and I had come down to visit on spring break. Most of my childhood friends, a small number to begin with, had moved away. I was a sophomore in undergraduate school, bored with visiting my parents and a penchant for staying up too late.

I had just turned 21, but wasn't really looking to go out and party, especially in a city that always felt too safe and too much like home. The pervasive quiet of Indianapolis bore into me, dulling my senses during the day, but then, like cicadas, roared at night. I hadn't seen him in two years, but I was aware of the club because it was only a block from his apartment. While we were dating we never went, I was underage and it wasn't the kind of place you would go on a date. One night I decided to drive down Meridian street to go by his old building. It was a decently sized brick building of vague German influence, like many of the buildings in Indy. His apartment had been on the top floor, just high enough to see over I-65 as it turns east, cutting over Meridian street.

It was a warm, spring night in Indy, so I rolled down one of the windows to let the flow of moist air fill the car. As I passed over Fall Creek I could begin to make out his apartment. I pulled into the parking lot and looked up at what had been his apartment – obviously he wasn't there. After a few minutes I decided there was nothing else to do so I began to head home when I drove past Club Unicorn, finding its parking lot rather full, in stark contrast to the quiet night that seemed to exist everywhere else in the city. Against my better judgement I decided to go in and see what it was like. I reached into my book bag, an old army issue bag that an uncle had given to me, and pulled out some markers and a new accordion style sketchbook I had just bought. I walked up the steps to the door and pressed a button to get in. I looked up at the corner of the door to a dark, glass orb that housed a camera. A buzz sounded and I proceeded inside. An older man, stout in his build, sat in an anteroom and told me I had to buy a “membership” to get in. Not knowing any better, and letting my curiosity do the thinking I paid my ten dollar dues.

Inside was a perplexing layout: a small bar and a series of nooks & mirrors.

Colored lights flashed and pulsed, this paired with the reflective surfaces created an illusion that the space I was in was much larger than it appeared to be. Paradoxically, this also created areas that were especially hard to see, creating bubbles of privacy that were relatively wide out in the open. I was coming close to having two years of experience with figure drawing from live models and pulled out my sketchbook. I began to fill the pages with quick gestural studies that bleed over from one page into the next, creating a panorama of fragmented body parts. I would have rather been drawing him, I had seen him only a few months ago when I came home on fall break. He hadn't been doing well, he was back living with his parents, coincidentally was only a block from where I had grown up. We had met up the last time, for a tryst. He looked tired, but happy to see me. I was glad to see him, as he had taken my virginity. A week later he would be dead.

The club's other clientele were mostly old men, most dressed in button up shirts and khakis. I was the only patron that was under the 40 year mark. Most of the dancers seemed confused by my presence, though a couple came up to me after their routines and flirted with me a bit. I am sure I was an anomaly to them. I did try and tip them for chatting with me – I didn't want to be a complete waste of their time. I did refuse to tip them by putting the money in their waist bands – I was too coy for this – so I simply handed them dollar bills instead. It was a quaint, if not entirely awkward gesture. After a few hours there I had completely filled up my sketchbook. The colors I had used seemed eerie and disjointed outside of the colored light and darkness of the club – like something that shouldn't exist but regardless, persists. Looking at these drawings it began to dawn on me - I couldn't capture a person through marks but maybe I could capture an atmosphere. A few years later Club Unicorn would close down permanently, another place back home that has nothing in it for me to see again.





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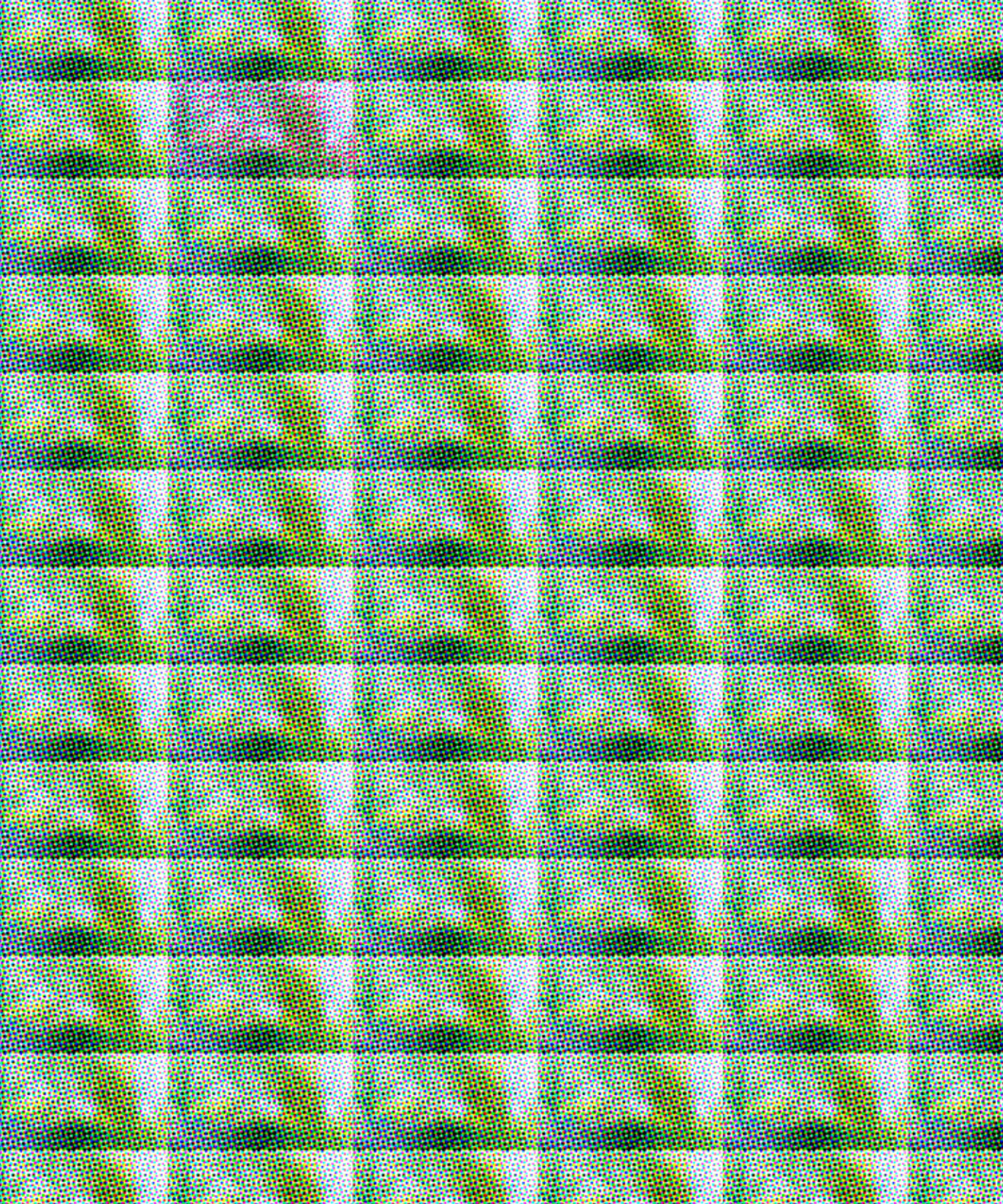
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PATTERN

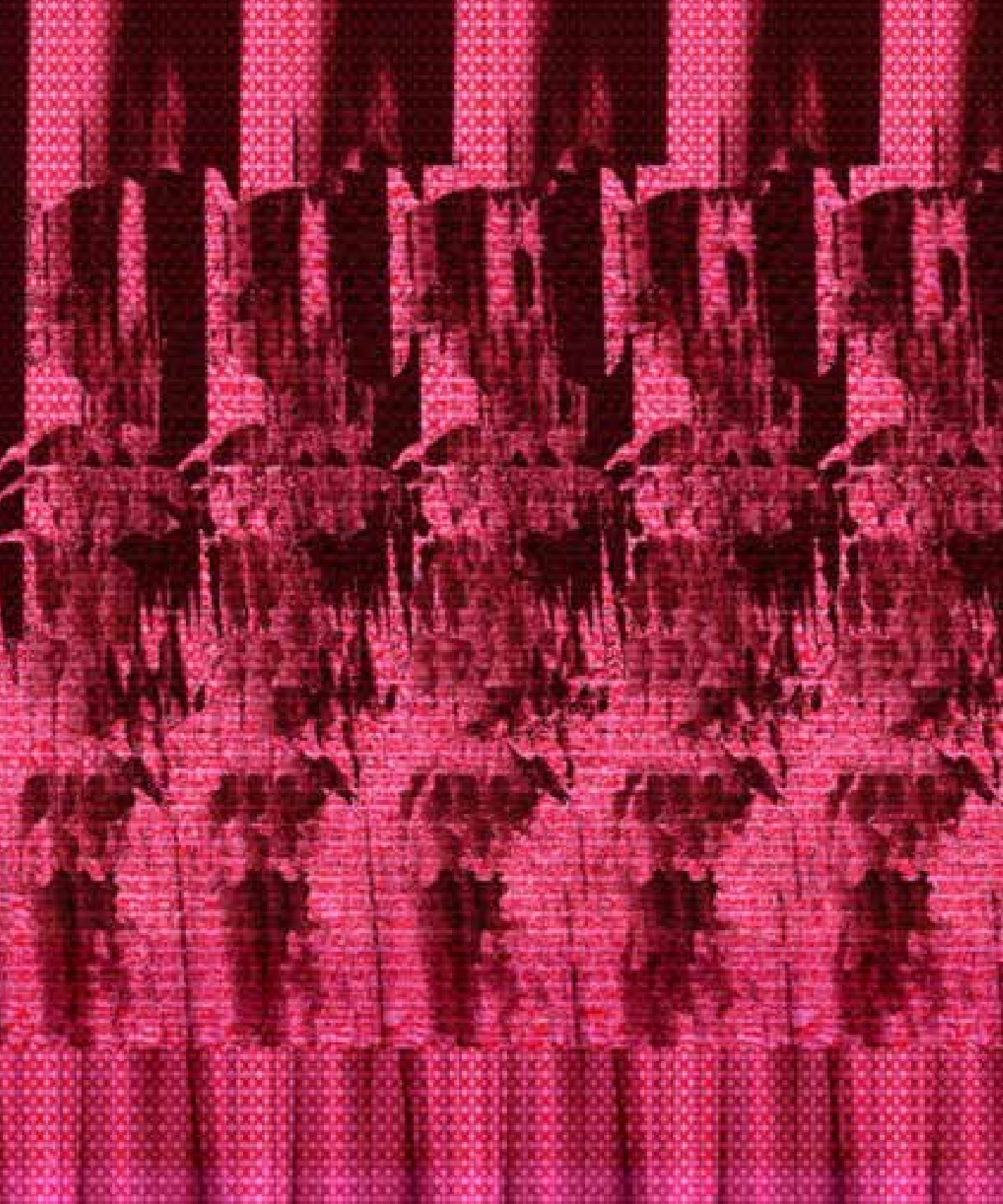
In kindergarten and first grade my circle of friends consisted of girls. I had an odd amalgam of interests ranging from my little pony to Transformers. I had a deep connection to the pink power ranger – Kimberly. I all identified with her beauty, her style and the way she commanded both strength and attention of her male counterparts. These interests pretty much barred me from pursuing deep friendships with other boys my age. At an early age I looked up to and felt more comfortable around girls. They possessed so many traits that I envied. The climate at my school was one where girls could be pretty, but boys were kept from this title. This has always bothered me.

At the start of second grade there was a shift in the dynamics in the group. I would later learn that most children go through a period where they prefer to socialize only with their own gender. That it is only in middle school that cross gender friendships begin again. A few weeks into the year it was decided - that since I was a boy I would not be welcome to play with my group of friends any more. I was shocked and confused by this, granted this slight was small in retrospect, but at the time it cut deep. I tried to build some friendships with other boys but the bonds of the social fabric had been woven and I was destined to be an outsider. Recess was the hardest time of the day. Luckily the winters in Indianapolis are short; the fall and spring are both relatively warm. Beyond the gravel of the playground lay a large field of grass and clover that acted as a buffer between the elementary school and the surrounding neighborhood. It was in this liminal space that I would spend my time every recess until the start of middle school.

How I would occupy my time came naturally to me. The patches of clover were abundant and the lazy upkeep of the lawn meant that it was rarely mowed. I would wander around, hovering above the clover or lay on my belly immersing my whole vision in a pattern of green. The faint flecks of mint color would overlay onto the deeper shadows of the ground below. A repeating pattern of three leaves seemed to stretch out before me like an ocean, only interrupted by an aberration in the repeat – a four leaf clover. Over the next three years I would find and collect dozens of four leaf clovers, I even found a handful of five leaf, and a six-leaf clover once. I would never really try to find a four leaf clover, rather I would relax my eyes, much like looking at one of those Magic-Eye puzzles and gaze at a patch of green. Once my eyes were blurring out any change in the pattern of repeated threes would jump out at me, surrounded by a kind of glowing aura of difference. It was too much work to try and find a lucky clover, rather I let them find me by getting lost in fields of pattern, letting my vision vibrate and ungulate in their uniform color.









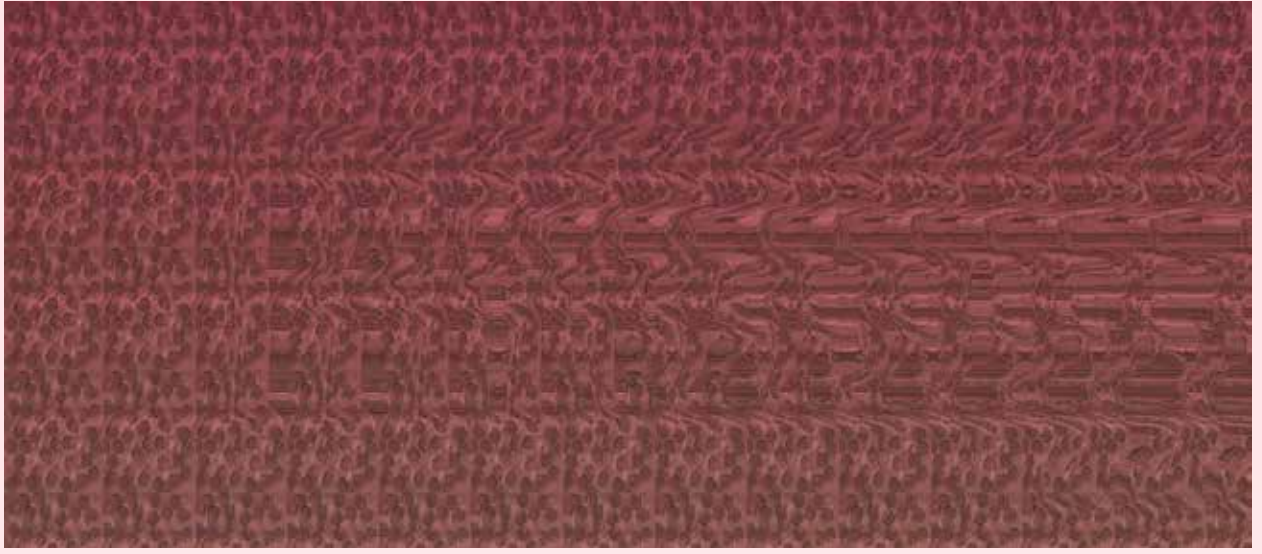


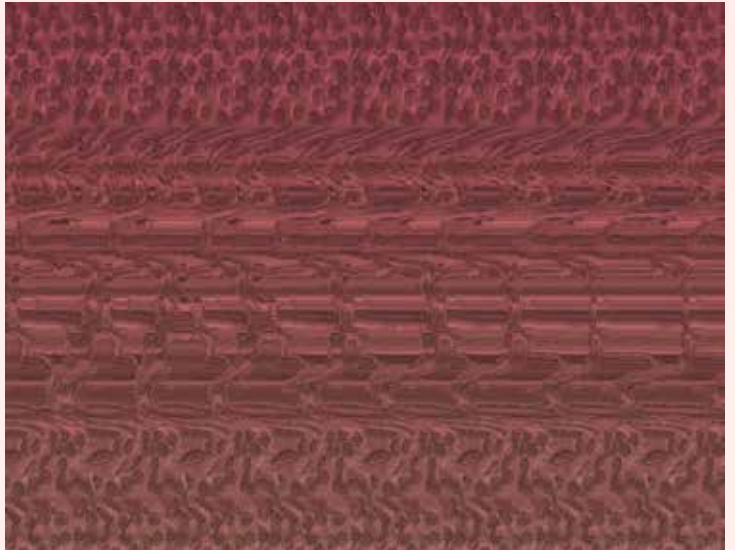
I wish you really were a sailor
that old, tired cliché
dragged up
 in drag

and lacking modern satellites
I serve
up in the sky
as your personal north star
guiding you forever (and ever)
to me

but now we (and especially you)
have GPS on our (your) phone
and you
no longer need me to find your way
all points
all directions lead you
away from me
 and into the low, hum drum, dark back-alley love
that you really were after
 the whole (hole) damn time.

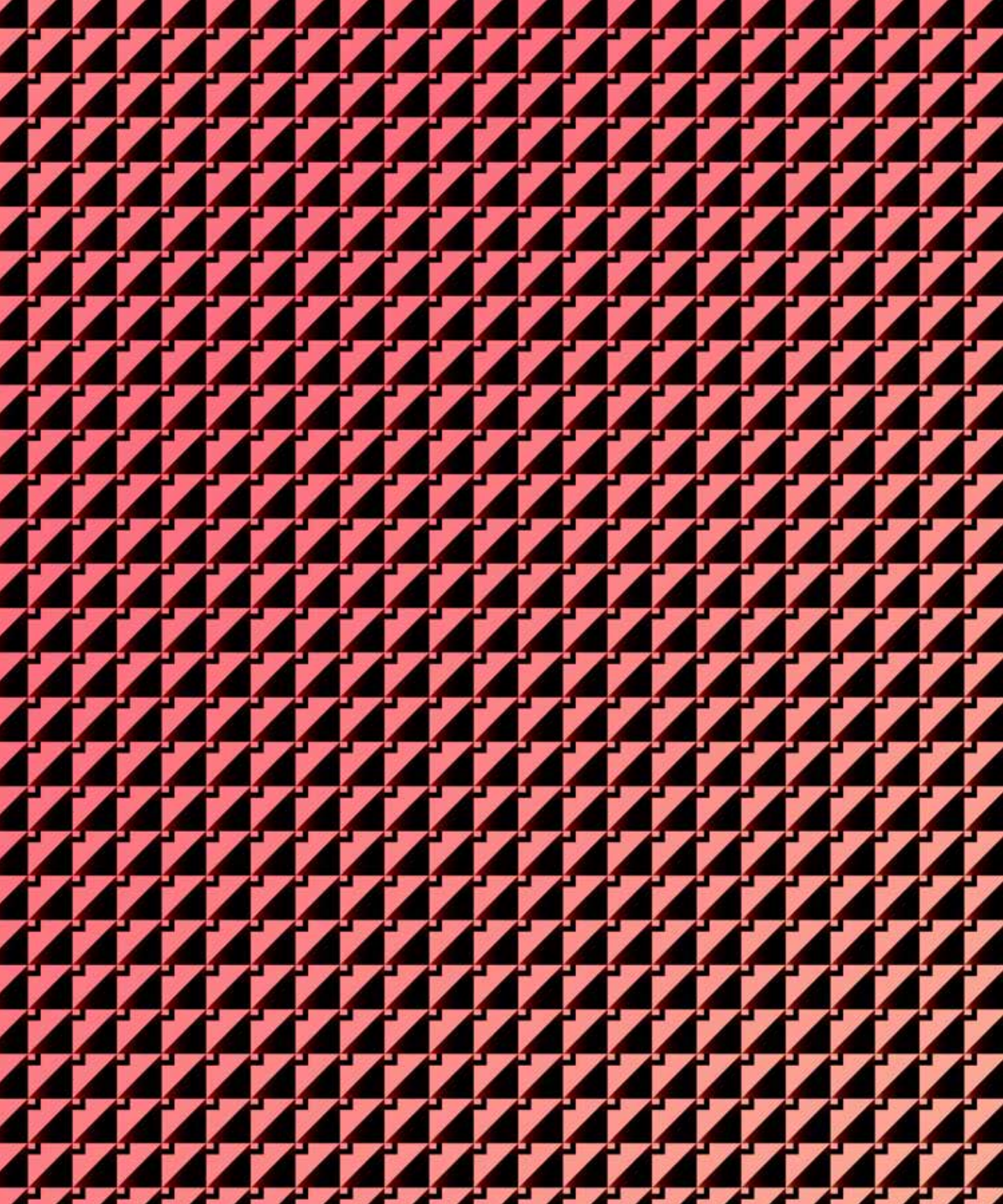


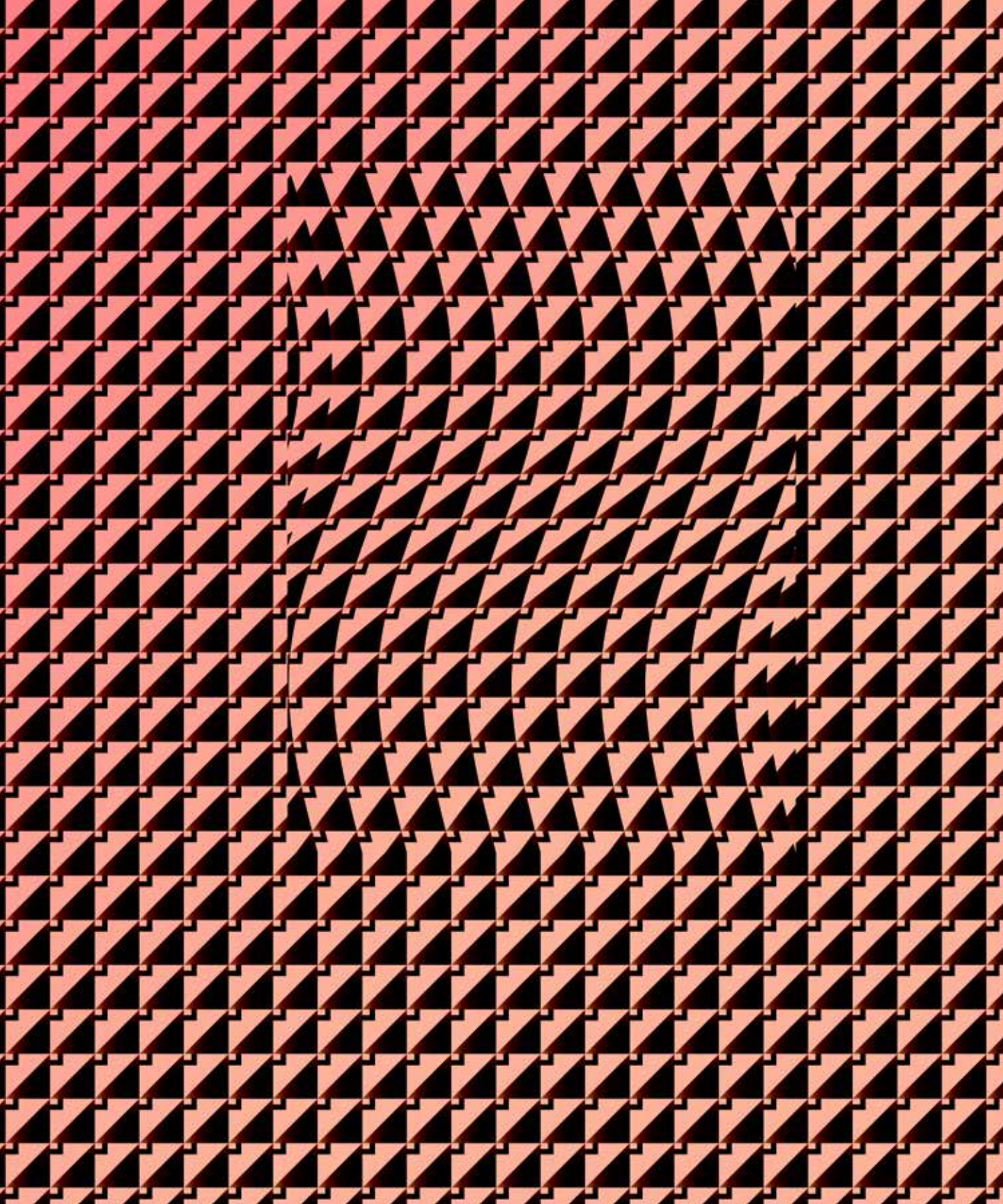


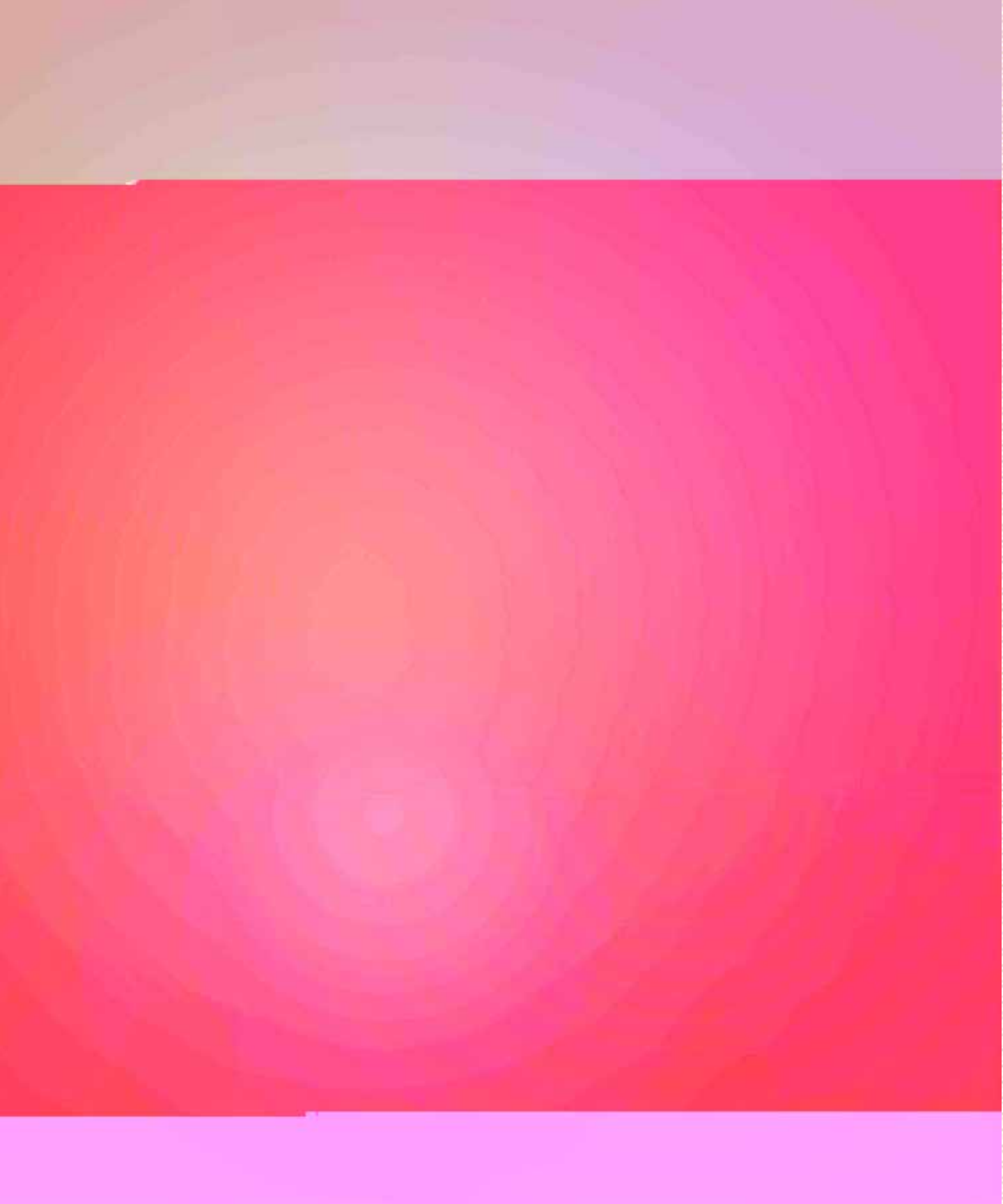












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