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Graphic Design & Painting

Emily Zepp
enz2@uakron.edu

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Disconnect: Graphic Design & Painting

By Emily Zepp

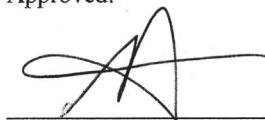
Department of Graphic Design

Honors Research Project

Submitted to

*The Williams Honors College
The University of Akron*

Approved:



Honors Project Sponsor (signed)

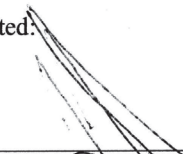
Matthew Kolodziej

Honors Project Sponsor (printed)

11/29

Date

Accepted:



Honors Faculty Advisor (signed)

Marcus Vogt

Honors Faculty Advisor (printed)

11/29/2022

Date



Honors Project Reader (signed)

Nathan Prebonick

Honors Project Reader (printed)

11/28

Date



Department Chair (signed)

Scott Troutman

Department Chair (printed)

11-29-22

Date



Honors Project Reader (signed)

David Flynn

Honors Project Reader (printed)

11/29/22

Date

Starting with the desire to explore the connection between GD and painting, I realized the only difference between the two is the context in which the work is created. Both graphic design and painting seek to impart messages upon the viewer and explore a certain perspective. Success can be measured in both disciplines by the effectiveness of the communicated message.

Graphic designers improve the memorability, communication, and thoughtfulness of information and messages by use of tools like typography, photography, and illustration.¹ The purpose of the message can be varied. However, the work is usually done for a client and is commercial in nature. After a design's intended purpose is fulfilled, it is often no longer regarded as valuable or worth keeping. After the event has concluded designs are thrown away by the recipients. While graphic design history is not as defined as that of painting, the discipline has been used as a method of activism, spreading government campaigns, and creating a sense of nationalism.² The designer themselves usually doesn't decide what message the work will be spreading.

¹ "What Is Design." AIGA. AIGA. Accessed October 30, 2022. <https://www.aiga.org/what-is-design>

² Triggs, Teal. "Graphic Design History: Past, Present, and Future." *Design Issues* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 3–6. doi:10.1162/DESI_a_00051. <https://login.ezproxy.uakron.edu:2443/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=57201398&site=ehost-live>

Contemporary Painting is a visual process and message motivated by the creator's intentions. Works are created by the individual artist and then sold to buyers or commissioned. While there is a commercial aspect to painting, the process and definition of painting is less rigid than that of a designer. Paintings can carry a meaning that resonates through the centuries and are often thought of as valuable fine art objects. In David Joselit's essay "Painting Beside Itself," he presents the idea of a transitive painting, that objects "are defined by their circulation from place to place and their subsequent translation into new contexts."³ In this way, the QR codes I use are defined by their translation from screen to painting, and from painting to screen as they move through different contexts. The pieces of the object, that being the QR code, is also part of a network moved to a different context. In this way, I'm making a painting out of the code instead of translating one into code. The smaller parts of the whole are still recognizable as the whole, but do not fulfill their purpose without being whole.

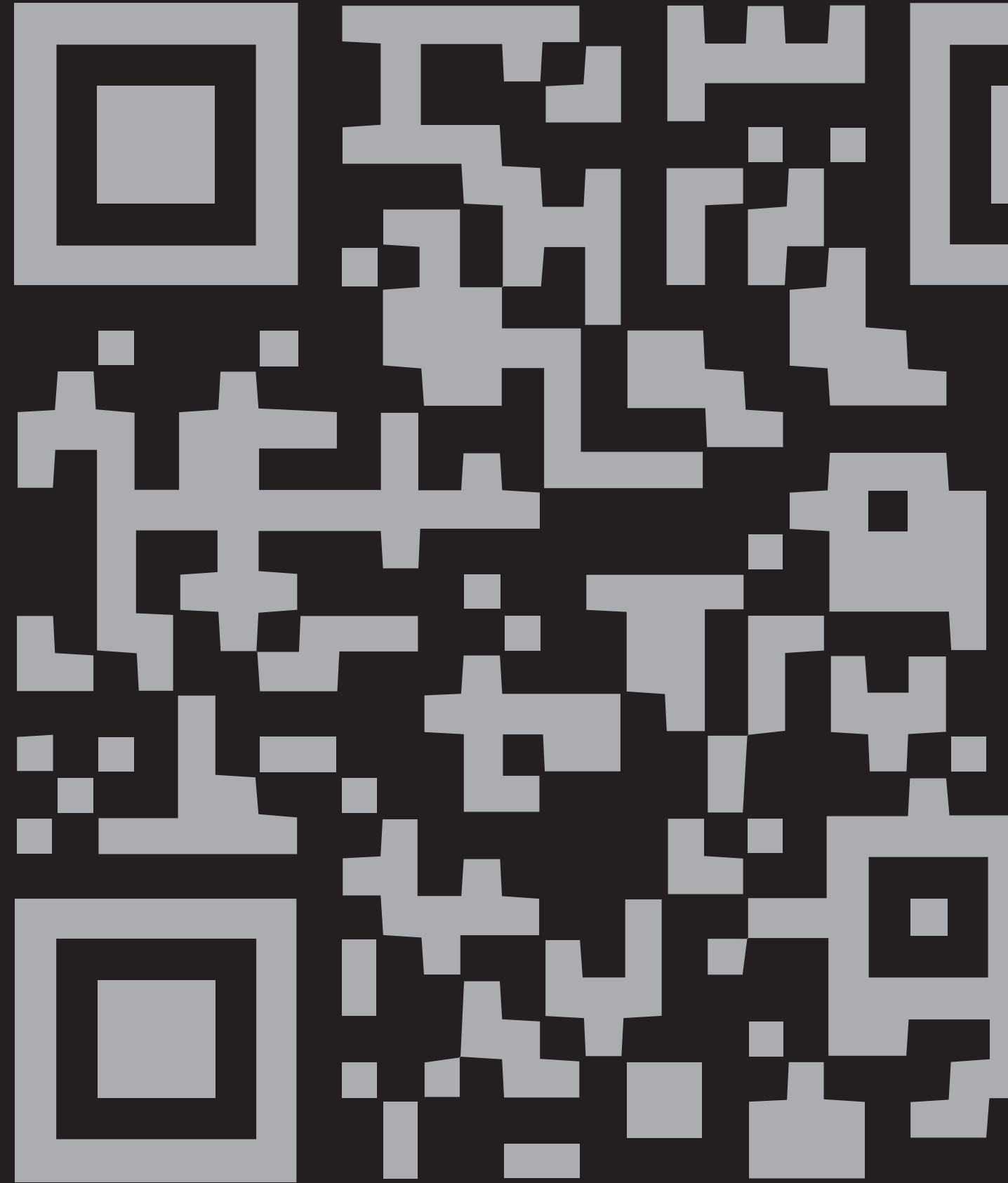
³ Joselit, David. "Painting Beside Itself." *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009): 125–34. doi:10.1162/octo.2009.130.1.125. <https://login.ezproxy.uakron.edu:2443/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=44920040&site=ehost-live>

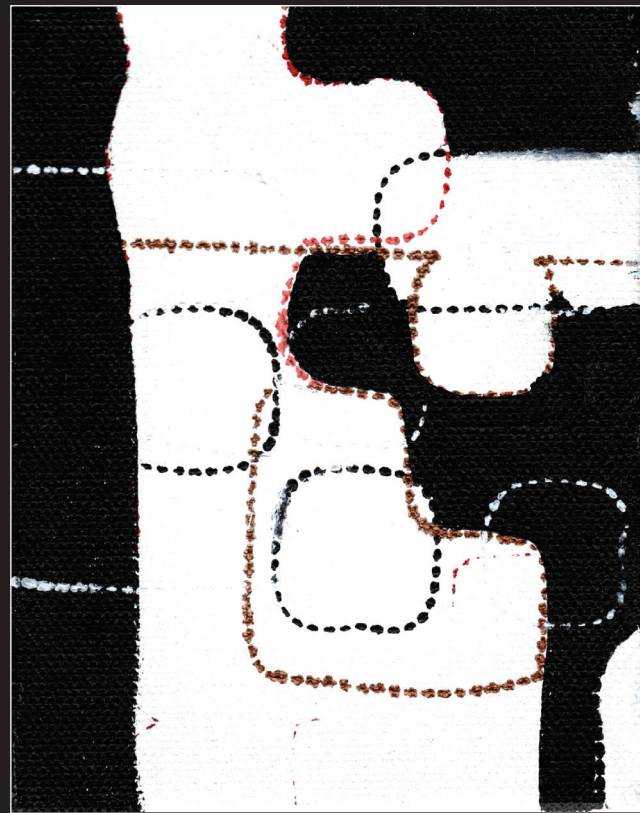
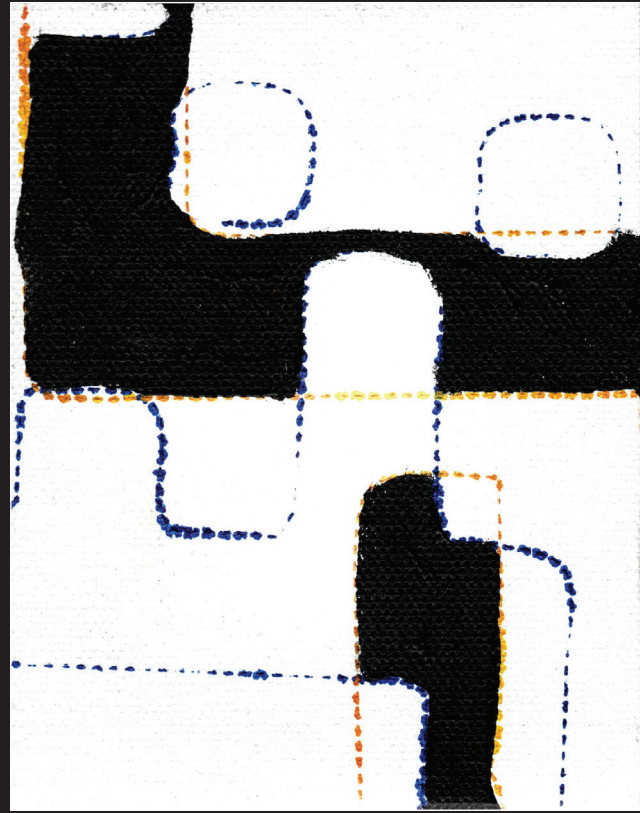
For inspiration, I looked at the works of Kahlil Robert Irving and his exhibition *Projects: Kahlil Robert Irving* at the MOMA. He talks about sourcing images from the web, CGI-built landscapes, and from TV shows to make a physical and intangible experience.⁴ Irving scans printed images into the computer, reusing photos taken by someone else. The idea of taking found materials and digitally sourced resources played into my desire to explore QR codes, which connect to found sources on the web.

QR codes are a type of barcode, commercial in nature. QR codes can link to text, websites, email, WIFI, bitcoin, mp3, images, and more.⁵ They are meant to be a bridge between print and digital. Nowadays, everyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can access the linked information through the code. Despite their multitude of uses, they are often created to communicate information for single, contained events, and then discarded.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the usage of QR codes accelerated. From 2018 to 2020, there was a 96% increase in user interaction with QR codes.⁶ This significant spike in the prevalence and number of scans was timely in multiple ways. All iPhones became capable of scanning a QR code in 2017 and by 2020 81% of all adults had smartphones natively able to use the codes.⁷ Smartphone accessibility significantly increased the spread of QR codes.

I explored the idea of taking the disposable and making it permanent in a series of three 4"x5" paintings, three 36"x48" paintings, a brochure, and an 8.5"x11" newsprint. In my design work, I've often been asked to use QR codes as they link to information quickly and easily. The client asks for them to be added onto to a document to communicate more of their own message, disrupting the page and the design. They are considered a convenient and cheap method of communication, as the creation of one is simple and free. The aesthetic of the page is disrupted to spread the client's message. As the client and the designer, I choose not to deliver this message. What would normally be an add-on to a design or an eyesore, now becomes the central image. The human eye may be able to infer how the code should properly be constructed, but a computer is entirely literal. A camera can't make the jump necessary to access the message hidden within the jumbled pieces. I generated the QR codes I used in this body of work with an online generator. The codes all link to various defunct websites that are no longer accessible, further emphasizing the idea of a critical disconnect.



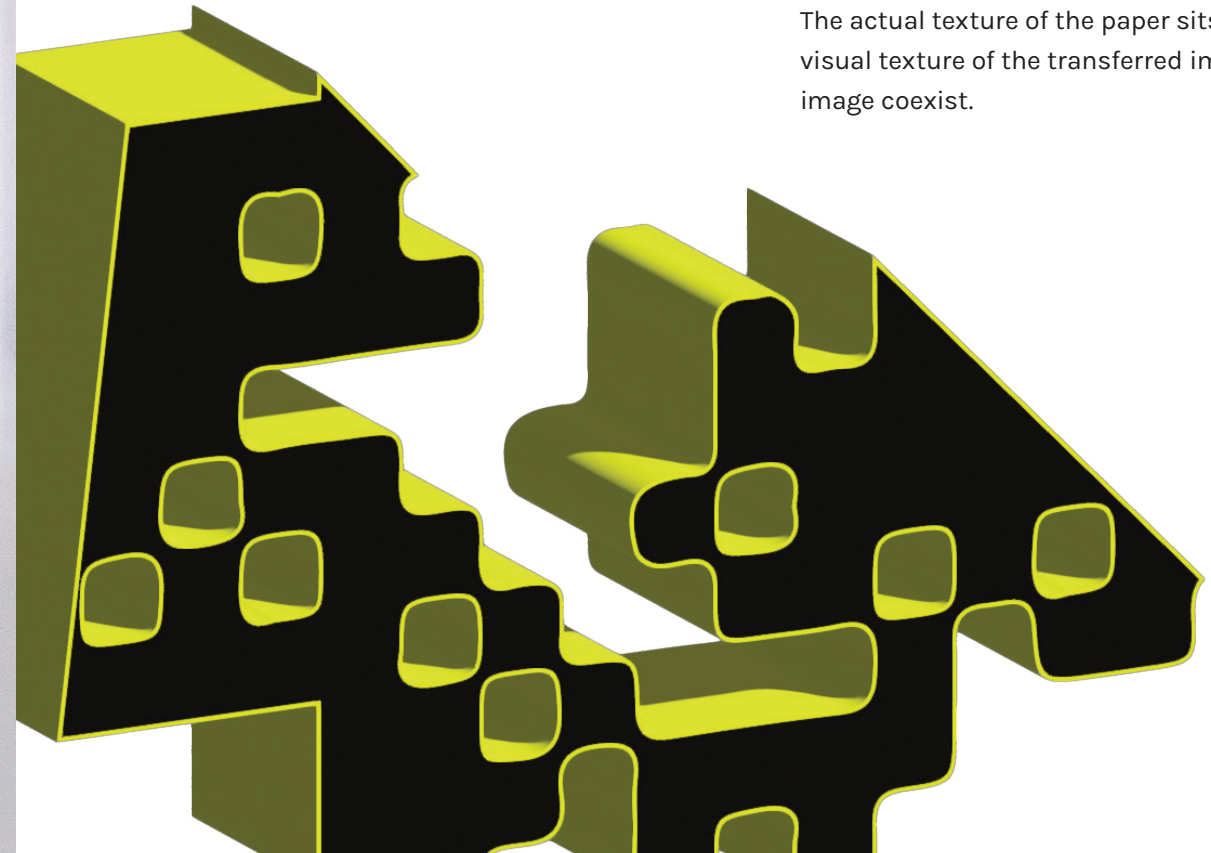


The small paintings are made with dotted lines created by painting through laser cut perforated paper. The perforated lines contrast with the solid, floating black forms in the foreground. Perforation is in-between foreground and background, an ambiguous middle ground. The perforation infers meaning and solidity in the image but is still impossible to assemble the image and decipher the QR code. Despite the messages inscrutable nature, each dash is a part of the larger system that passes along the message and are a part of it. Forming the whole of each shape of the code, they are also individual shapes in their own right. Each of the paintings has different levels of complexity regarding this relationship. Like some of the other works, the solid black shapes are the foremost elements of the image in two of the three paintings. The perforated lines frame them. In the third painting, white perforated lines go over the black shapes but fade into the white background.

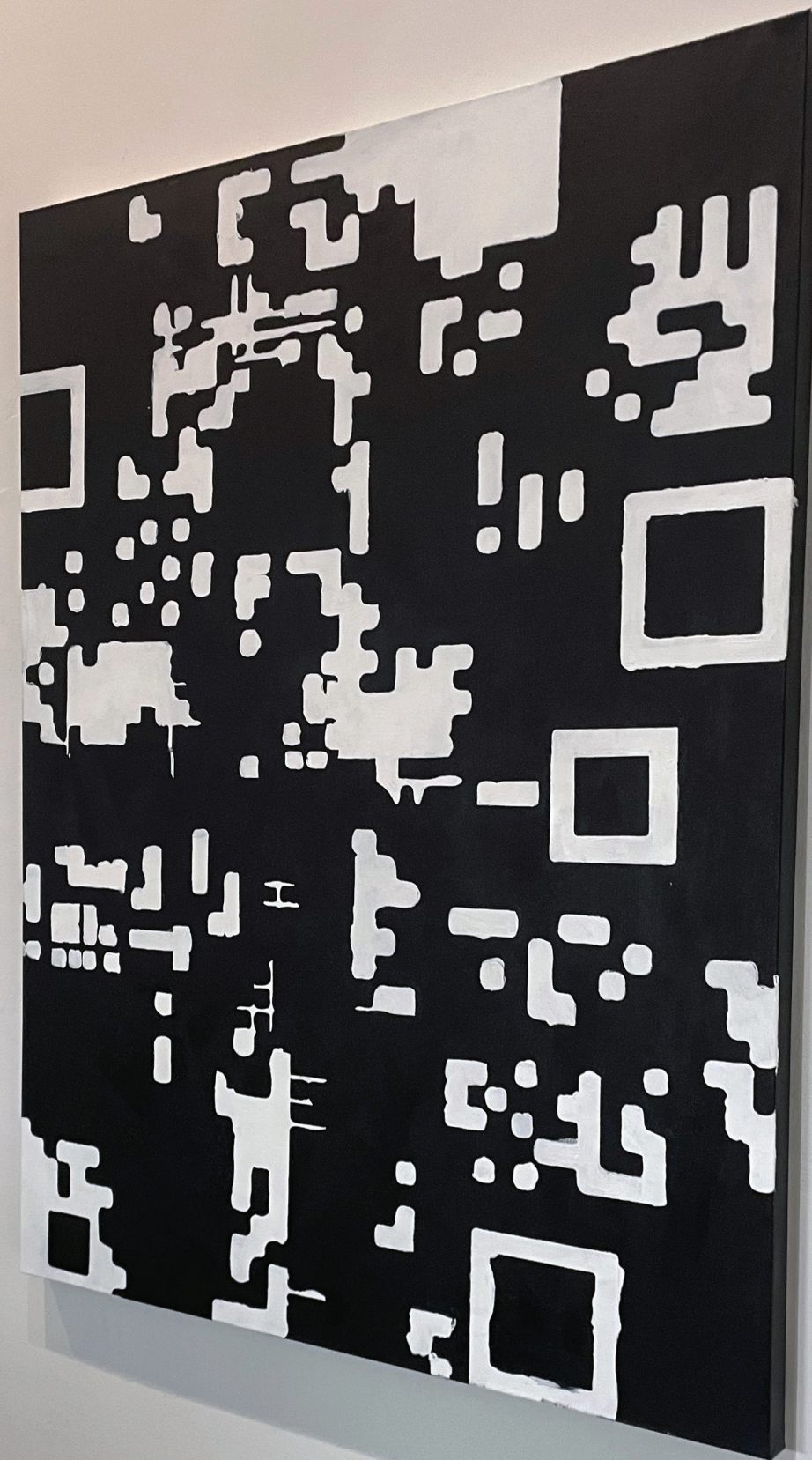


With the first work, I put the QR codes in Illustrator and made the entire code three dimensional and set at an angle. The first code I rendered as a three-dimensional object with minimal lighting and barely defined edges. Then, I used the QR codes I had generated and deconstructed them. I experimented with the second code by cutting it up and resizing the various pieces. I used the negative space of the code to make the design elements. While the interior of these three-dimensional shapes is the traditional QR black, the outer edges have color. Color divides the space and defines the third dimension of each shape. The areas between the QR code also form a shape that interacts with the white background.

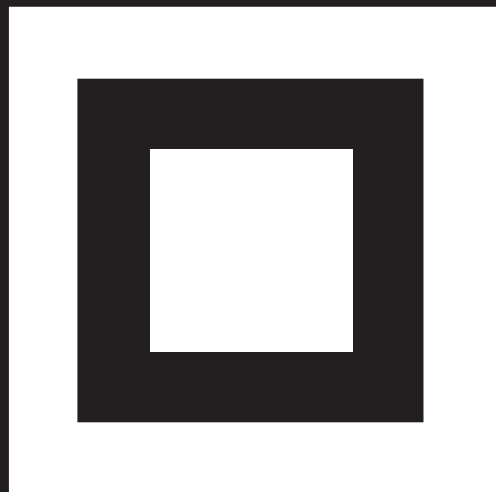
I used inkjet transfer to bring my design from the computer as the transfer process makes the image on the canvas imperfect in unique ways. Any digital assets can be recreated endlessly. The physical experience, on the other hand, can't be recreated. The sense of weight, touch, and time invoked by a physical piece are an essential to viewing experience and understanding of a painting. The actual texture of the paper sits next to the visual texture of the transferred image. Object and image coexist.



I used a different method to deconstruct and translate the codes in the second painting. I wanted to explore a more exact way of transferring the digitally created art to the physical realm, introducing more mechanical processes. After vectorizing two QR codes in Illustrator, I then used the various pieces of the codes creating a disjointed, asymmetrical composition to make a stencil. I laser cut a stencil from four sheets of 22"x28" posterboard using the Illustrator file, which were then combined to cover the entire surface of the canvas. The background was painted with acrylic carbon black paint, and the foreground was first painted on with one layer of titanium white and then a second layer of white titanium matte paint. This created contrast between the texture of the background and that of the foreground. The edges of the shapes are sometimes soft and sometimes crisp, playing with the relationship between the foreground and the background.

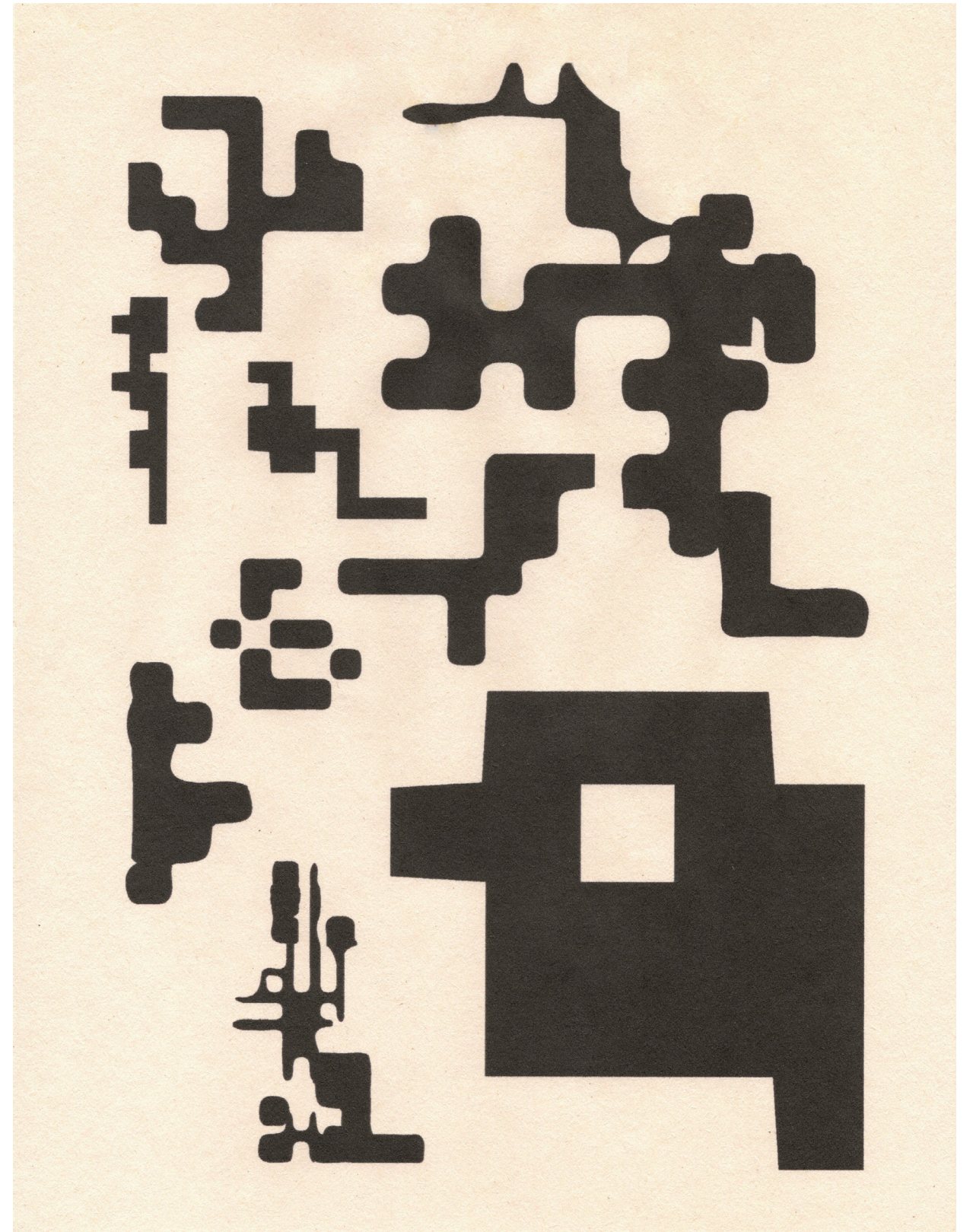


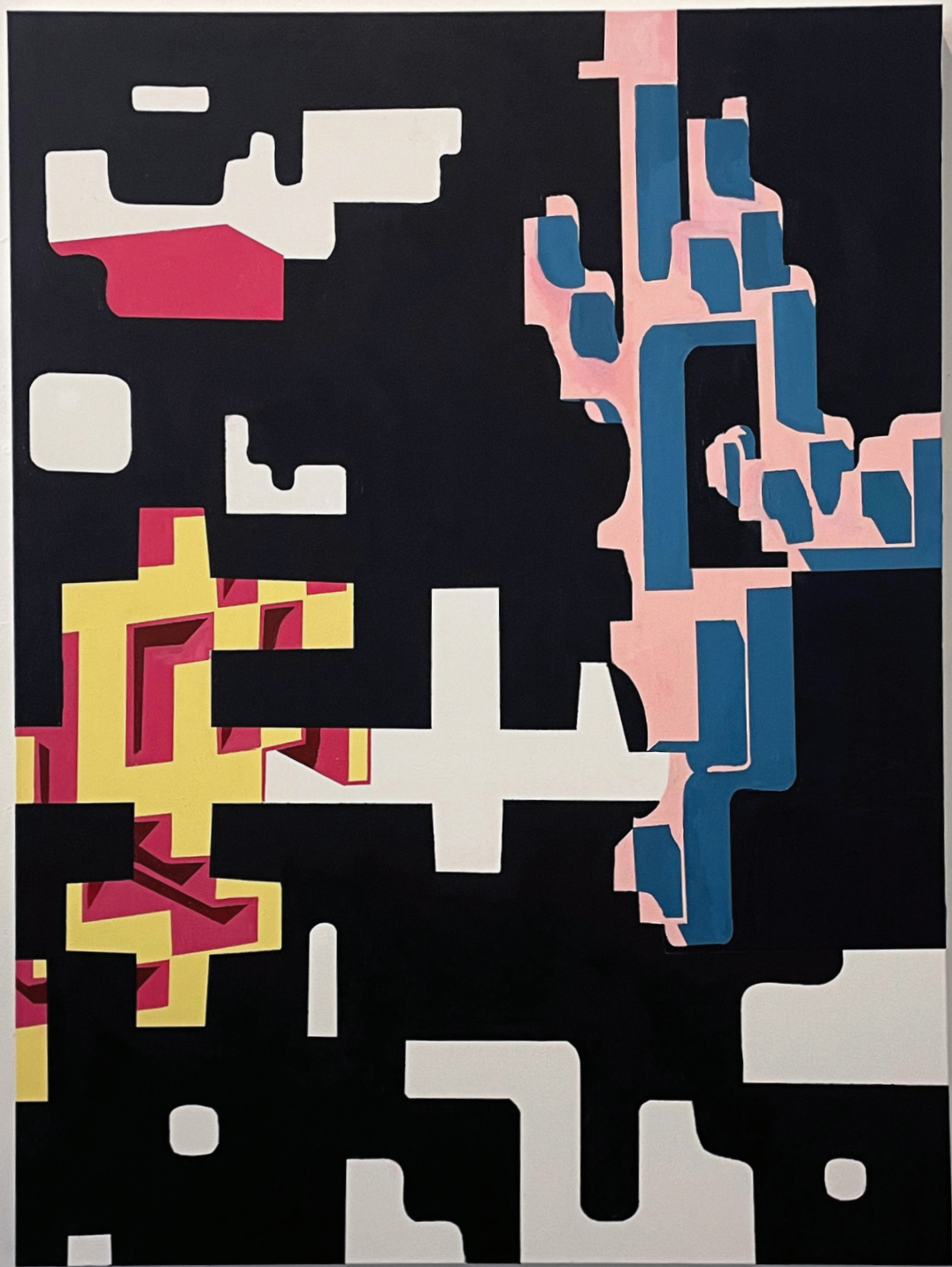
The newsprint space is composed in a more rooted, architectural manner than the paintings. The basic QR forms are presented plainly as they are. Looking at movements such as Brutalism, Brutalism was an architectural movement that intended to create entirely functional memorable, structurally, and materially honest buildings.⁸ Brutalist design lacks decoration, just as the newsprint lacks the disruptive and decorative elements of my other works in this series. The placement of the shapes resembles an overhead layout of a city or building. The rawness of the materials and their nature as found is also an important tenant of Brutalism.⁹ The pieces of QR code are sourced from the internet, and I used these website generated pieces with minimal translation. Color is kept the original black of QR codes, reflecting what the pieces look like in their natural environment. The newsprint paper reflects the idea of the ephemeral, as its usually used for non-archival, cheap projects.



⁸ Mould, Oli. "Brutalism Redux: Relational Monumentality and the Urban Politics of Brutalist Architecture." *Antipode* 49, no. 3 (June 2017): 703-4. doi:10.1111/anti.12306.

⁹ Mould, "Brutalism Redux," 704.





The third painting is a combination of the visual languages and techniques I used to create the first two. I used three dimensional renderings of QR codes, but also utilized flat, black vectors. Playing with the space, the black simultaneously reveals and conceals the three-dimensional elements. The black acts as a window and a curtain to the underlying composition. In graphic design terms, the mission statement is in front of all the boots on the ground work.

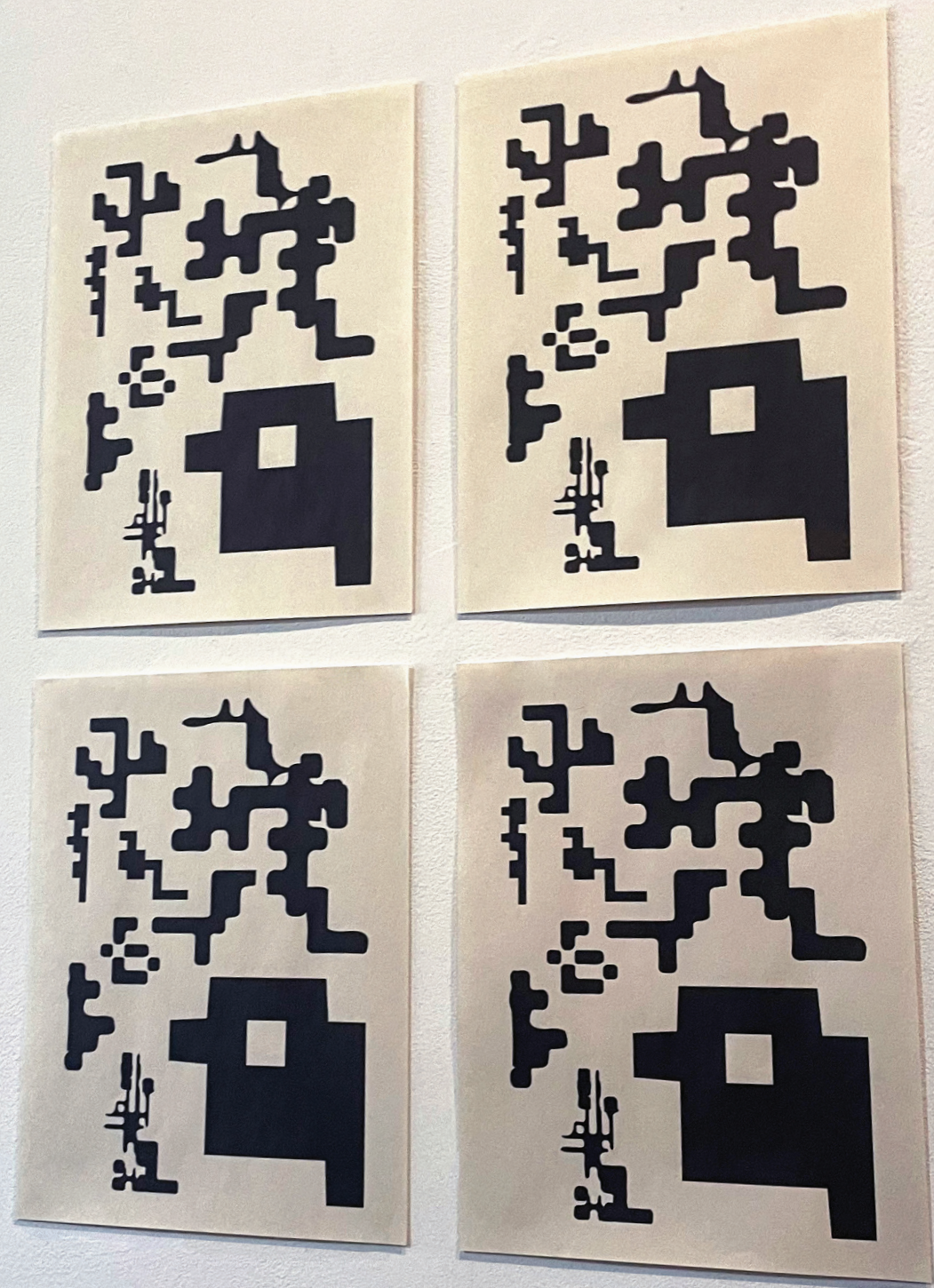
The relationship with the viewer is also unique to the series. They are placed inside of the painting, looking behind the black shapes, mirroring how I was placed inside of the composition while creating it. I stood between the projection and the paint. The red and orange form in the lower right-hand corner is beveled and the blue form in the top right is expanded. The Light sources for these dimensional elements are positioned differently. For the blue shape, the light appears to be coming from the top left of the picture frame, while in the red and yellow shape it appears to come from the bottom left. The varied directional light reinforces the feeling of the objects floating in a world of their own, following its own rules.

For my exhibition I used the lower atrium triangle at the Myers School of Art. The two big paintings were together on the larger while, adjacent to a black shelf which housed a brochure. The brochure incorporated parts of the various codes I used and had a three-dimensional pop out element. It gave a brief description of the title and reason for creating my work. The three small paintings were aligned in a triangle to relate to each other but given enough of a margin to separate the images. Four copies of the newsprint were hung on the wall in a square.

QR codes are defined by their nature as a connection; a network of shapes that together create meaning. By dividing them throughout the series, I deconstructed the specific message but maintained a correlation with messages. Each work translated the pieces of code uniquely through the use and combination of different visual languages. In a similar way, exploring the differences (or lack therefore) between graphic design and painting helped me better define my role as a cross-disciplinary artist that uses both. I tried different techniques than those I've used in the past. Laser cutting gave the image and paper a precision not possible manually. The third painting is the most successful example of combining the tools of painting and graphic design. The use

of transparencies and overhead projectors will be something I explore in the future. Creating a painting is done from the mechanical projection of a digitally made composition that was printed onto a transparency foregrounds the interaction between the physical and digital process. Positioning myself between the projection and the painting gave me a different relationship with the canvas surface. Creating a themed solo exhibition was also a new experience for me, as I've had a solo show before but not of a body of work I made for that show. I considered the visual and conceptual development of the idea more, knowing that all these works would be next to each other in the same context. It allowed me to focus more on a single thought.





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Thank you for reading!

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