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Integrative Project
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American Dreamboat:
Finding the Poetry in an Ordinary Life

My IP project, titled *American Dreamboat*, is a series of lithographs and woodcut prints that illustrate a collection of poems I have written. The poems and images are autobiographical in nature, and stem from an examination of my own experiences and beliefs as related to my identity as an American. The book is divided into four sections: "Stories from the Swamp," "New Frontier," "Endless Summer," and "The Stone." Each section focuses on a different facet of my experience that I see as being implicated in the idea of the American Dream.

In the history classes of my childhood, I was taught about the first American dream of "Manifest Destiny," in which the American narrative is that of the individual hero blazing a trail westward into wild lands (Stephanson 151). We also learned of a second "American Dream" which asserted that in America, the land of opportunity; anyone could achieve "the good life" through hard work. This "American Dream" was further defined by specifying the requirements for this "good life" as the complete package of house, yard, car, job, romantic partner and family (Samuel 200). My project is an exploration of the way that the values and desires implied in these American narratives have influenced my own personal narrative.

The first section of *American Dreamboat* is titled, "Stories from the Swamp." The poems and images in this section are those that come out of my memories of growing up in a small factory town in the sparsely populated Upper Peninsula of

Michigan (Figure 2). The "swamp" is both a descriptor of the physical landscape I grew up in and the local identity of this kind of town as a place where people "get stuck." This narrative of staying versus leaving and the imagery of a postindustrial landscape is attached to many such towns and cities located in the "Rust Belt" of the American Midwest. The Rust Belt is the informal description for a postindustrial region straddling the upper Northeastern, the Great Lakes, and the Midwest States, referring to economic decline, population loss and urban decay due to the shrinking of its once powerful industrial sector in the age of information (Mahaney 15). The choice for young people in towns like this is to leave or become "trapped" in this place that seems to lack in opportunities for growth: thus the description of the town as a "swamp." The poems in this section grow out of the attachment I have to this landscape: its natural beauty juxtaposed with a post-industrial landscape and the resultant narrative of wildness and ruin. This examination of my hometown grew out of an interest with graphic narratives such as "Essex County" by Jeff Lemire, which paints a portrait of a town and its characters as they are connected by the history of the place (Figure 3).

The second section of this book of poems is titled, "New Frontier." In our quest for Manifest Destiny, Americans have historically been at the forefront of innovation in transportation. The desire to go out into uncharted lands in the name of human advancement and in search of adventure has manifested itself in the invention of trains, cars, planes and finally, spacecraft. In my own experience, through two near-death experiences involving transportation, I have come to see this desire for adventure and travel ultimately as a chance that we take that brings

us closer to death or the idea of our own mortality. The poems and imagery in this section are informed by these near-death experiences and are ruminations on this connection between our mortality and our desire to explore and see new landscapes (Figure 4).

The third section of *American Dreamboat* is titled "Endless Summer." The idea of "summer" in America is representative of young people, freedom, and romance. The poems and images in this section are interested in the experience of adolescence as American culture describes it. The decisions we make as adolescents chasing our romantic ideals are not often advisable, and sometimes bring us harm. The main poem in this section is specifically about a romance I witnessed unfolding between two young people last summer, which was founded on a mutual affinity for self-destruction (Figure 5). Conceptually, this work is related to the work of Jenny Schmid, a lithographer who illustrates stories of adolescence and desire (Figure 6).

The last section of the book, titled "The Stone," contains just one poem, divided into three parts. This poem is concerned with an essential component of the American Dream: the work or labor of the individual. My dad worked for most of my childhood in a paper mill, and I grew up in a town built around factory work. Growing up in a place like this, where people take pride in the physical labor done in factories (as opposed to the purely mental labor done in the offices and cubicles) I feel that a desire to "do things the hard way" has been instilled deeply in me. In some way, I have been searching for a labor or work comparable to my father's.

When practicing lithography throughout this year, I felt like I had finally found my own necessary labor, and I was inspired to write a poem about it.

I chose to illustrate this poem with a series of still lives (Figure 6). I am interested in Gerard Manley Hopkins' idea of the "widowed image:" the object that takes on the burden of feeling and therefore imbues itself with meaning (Baxter 77). The objects in this series are symbols for the narratives of labor, love and devotion in my father's, grandmother's and my own life.

"The Stone" compares the work of my father and the devotion to God of his mother to my practice of lithography. My father's mother was a devout Christian, and though I am not a believer I still find that growing up with a Christian influence in my life has given me some religious tendencies. In the poem, I compare the ritual of printing lithographs to a kind of prayer.

To borrow a phrase from a former poetry professor, I find that I am compelled to write poetry simply because, "I am obsessed with my own experiences and the way I react to these experiences." I use poetry as a mechanism to help find meaning and pleasure in the everyday experiences of my life. The philosopher Paul Valery said that poetry is a "language all its own" (Koch 78). For me, the language of poetry is one that uses the music of words to speak intimately to others and to communicate feelings rather than concrete ideas.

Simultaneously, I am compelled to communicate through the language of visual images. My aesthetics and imagery are inspired by contemporary illustration. Like with poetry, the images that I make are also meant to speak intimately and in a way that is more connected to emotion than fully formed ideas. The poetry I write

serves as the inspiration for my image making. I arrive at these images first through drawing and then through printmaking. I love the physicality of printmaking processes and the opportunities for experimentation afforded by the creation of multiples.

When creating visual images, my process is very iterative. I begin with sketches and color studies done by hand. Then, I often rework these studies on the computer. Next, I create the print matrix by either drawing on a stone or carving a block of wood. After the print matrix is created, I am able to continue making iterations of an image by experimenting with color choices during printing. The transition from those first sketches to permanent drawings carved in wood or drawn on limestone is essential to my process of creating images.

A main goal of this project is simply to develop skills in the field of printmaking, especially in the two specific mediums that I have chosen to work in: stone lithography and woodcut printmaking. Stone lithography is attractive to me for a variety of reasons. I love the feeling of the stone as a drawing surface. I also appreciate the opportunity to work reductively into the drawing with drypoint needles and other tools. Through stone lithography, I am able to create a wide range of tonal values and experiment with various ways of making marks.

Woodcut printing is attractive to me primarily for the ease of color experimentation during printing. My method for cutting and aligning multiple color woodblocks to create a print is informed primarily from the instruction I received from professor Endi Poskovic. The woodcut prints in this project are primarily landscapes. My proclivity for this subject matter is influenced by the work of

Goedele Peeters, a visiting artist to the school from Belgium who very much inspired me at the beginning of this project (Figure 1).

Working in the printmaking studio this year has taught me much about the value of working in a shared space with other artists, and the considerations that must be taken in such a space. I have been able to learn technical craft by from watching other artists work in the studio, and I have also been able to impart some of the knowledge that I have gained to other students, which has been personally fulfilling.

My poetry has been informed greatly by the great American poet, Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass." I interpret Whitman's work primarily as a celebration of his experience, and a love letter to humanity, labor, and nature. I would like for my poetry and prints to act as a similar kind of celebration. Many of the images in my project are drawn within an oval frame, and are meant to create a sense of reverence and nostalgia towards the experiences they illustrate.

The foremost intent of my project has been to explore narrative image making, which I have done in a variety of ways: through obviously narrative scenes, portraiture, landscape, and still life. Through the making of this work, I have been able to develop my poetic voice and visual aesthetic, and to learn technical printmaking skills. The ideas and narratives that I am exploring in this project are ones that will continue to inform my future work as I further define myself as an artist both in and out of academia.

Works Consulted

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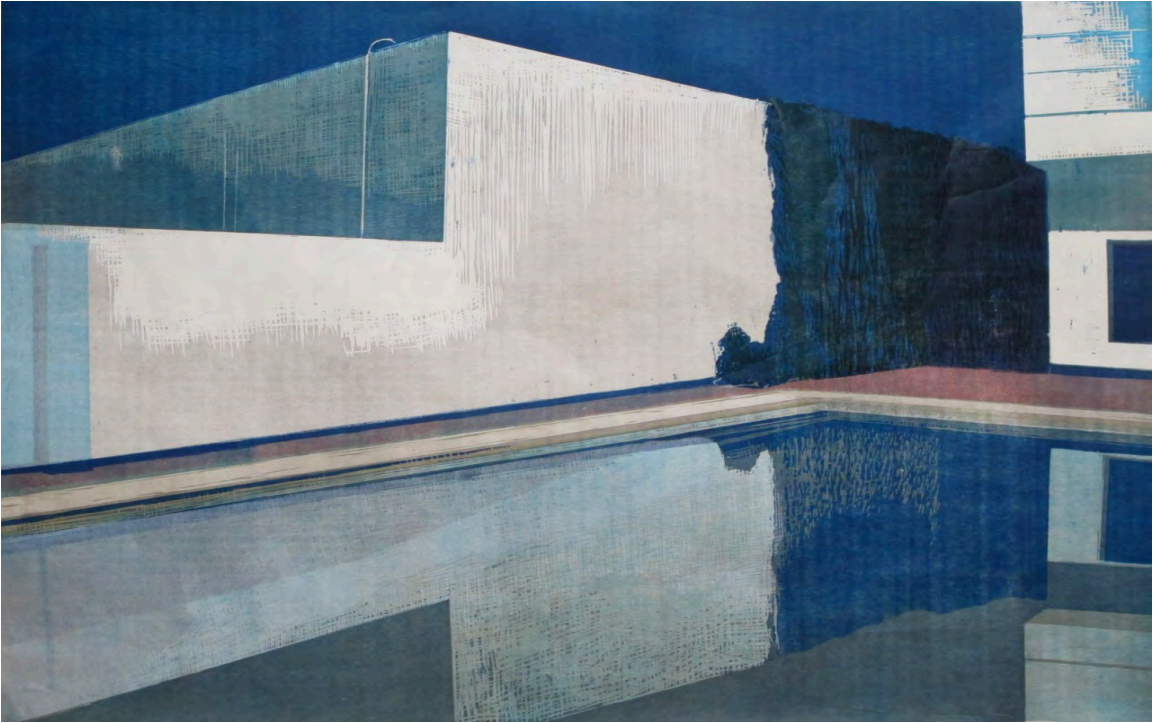
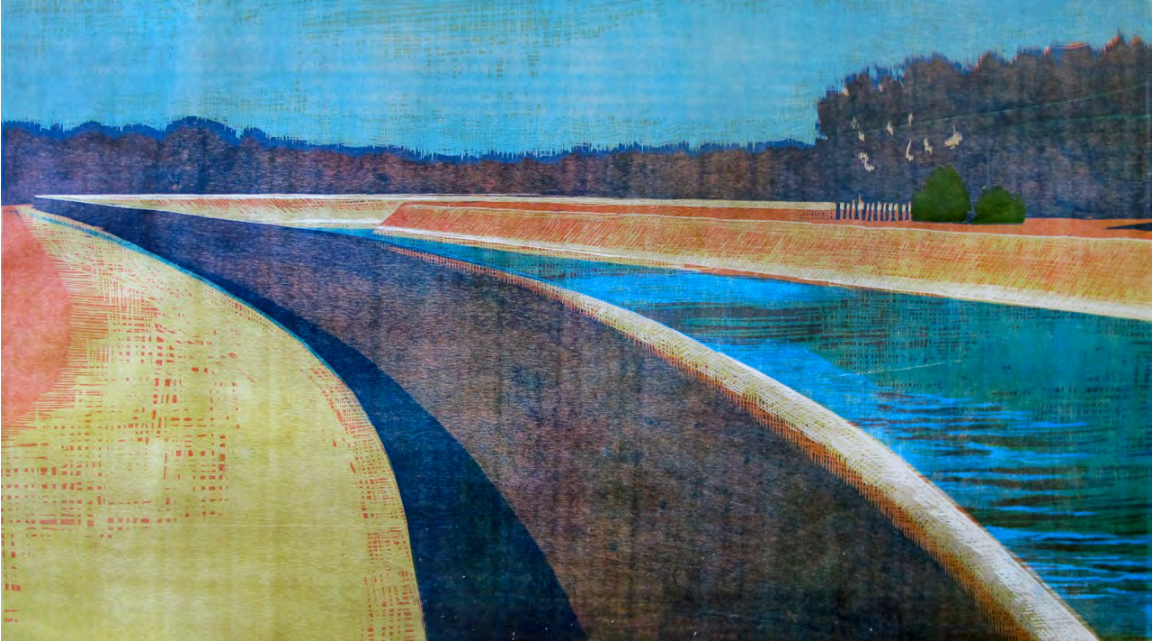


Figure 1: Reduction woodcuts by Goedele Peeters



Figure 2: Selections from "Stories from the Swamp"

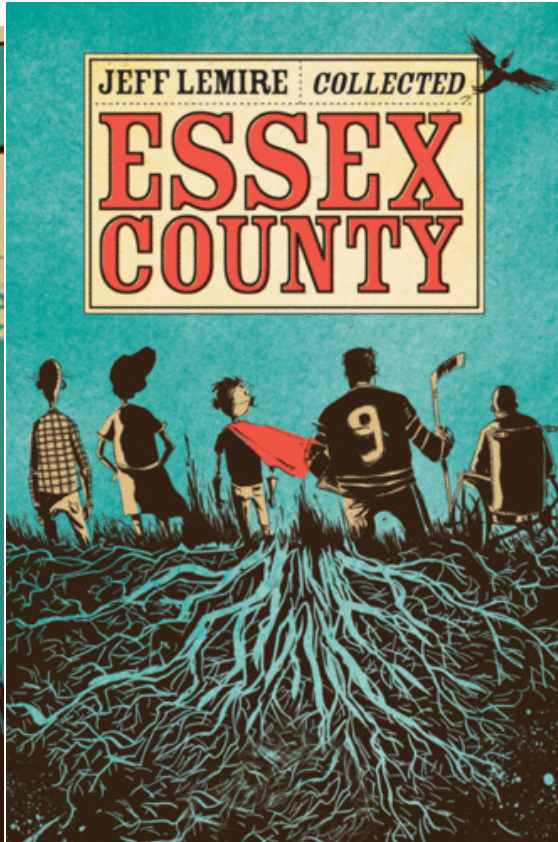


Figure 3: *Essex County* by Jeff Lemire



Figure 4: Selections from "New Frontier"



Figure 5: Selections from "Endless Summer"



Figure 6: lithographs by Jenny Schmid



Figure 7: Selections from "The Stone."