

Panoptic Museum
A series of studies held captive



Jacob Napier

Artist Statement

Often museum goers feel deterred by a fear of viewing art “improperly.” In order to create more accessible engagement with works of art, *Panoptic Museum: A series of studies held captive* presents a series of playful cut-paper dioramas akin to children’s pop-up books, in which the viewer is given the option to explore the visual language hidden in famous paintings through interactive pull tabs and brochures.

My interdisciplinary education in art and design and art history led me to create *Panoptic Museum: A series of studies held captive* as a proposal for museums to add visual learning supplements alongside their exhibition labels, with the intention to reveal to the general public the unseen violence and social implications hiding in plain sight.



Exhibition Material Documentation



Detail of study of Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814)



Detail of study of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-1516)

Cut paper dioramas, studying seven famous paintings are mounted to the walls of the studio at standard gallery height in a straight line wrapping the three walls of the square studio space. The works are framed by a black, floating foam core frame, encased by a transparency comparing the work to another relevant work or pointing out a detail of its composition.



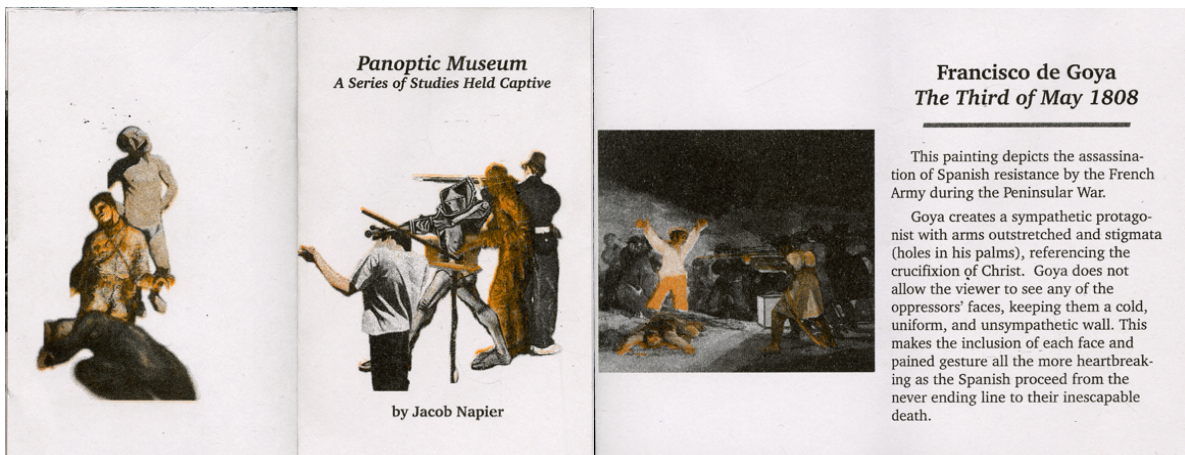
Detail of study of Ilya Repin's *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan* (1883-1885)



Detail of study of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819)



Details of informational zine



Informational zines were included to provide a quick context to the work's historic context, point out a key visual element, and/or acknowledge controversy with its contemporary audience.

Contextualization

Artist Precedents

Enrique Chagoya – *Le Cannibale Moderniste* (1999)

Enrique Chagoya's work has been influential to my practice since I first viewed one of his codices up close in UMMA. The bulk of Chagoya's work is in a realm of revisionist history, asking what would have happened if the Europeans failed and were themselves conquered by meso-americans instead?" For Chagoya, the answer is not utopian, but a brutally honest alternative of equal genocide of people and culture.

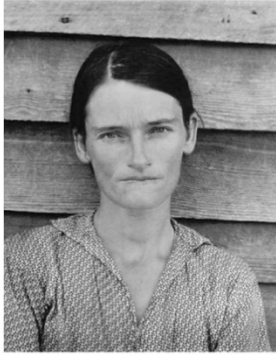


Le Cannibale Moderniste is a work that encapsulates these feelings best. The painting depicts an amalgamate landscape of Impressionist works like Monet's *Truth of Nature*, and *Water Lilies* in which caricatures of famous painters are being killed and cannibalized by a Mesoamerican woman, all while supporting an infant on her back. These figures include a speared and amputated Picasso, the comics character Asterix, and a headless bearded man (possibly Monet) with a speech bubble containing a cropped Mondrian painting.

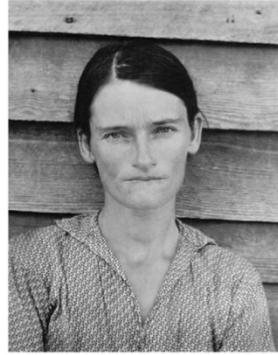
The use of the familiar made to feel nonsensical is made more impactful when juxtaposed to the faded native iconography along the bottom of the work, parts of a visual language lost in the inquisition against Meso-America.

Chagoya's work has always shocked and excited me, as it brings home many feelings both critical of glorifying the western canon as well as feelings of confusion processing the atrocities and loss of culture in the Americas. This work opened me up to the world of appropriation and repurposing of the familiar and famous. It made me curious how referencing the canon lent its authenticity to Chagoya's work, even when he was critical of it.

Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans* (1981)



Walker Evans
Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife, 1936
Gelatin silver print



Sherrie Levine
After Walker Evans 1981

If Chagoya opened me up to the world of appropriation, Sherrie Levine sunk me deep. Discovering her work *After Walker Evans* (1981) in which she photographed and printed existing photographs by American photographer Walker Evans baffled me. I was not aware that someone could be so upfront about plagiarizing another artist's

work and be respected as an artist. The concept of appropriation amazed me, though to do it in this way seemed like something steeped in legal battles with estates and funds that I was not in possession of. Nevertheless this extreme example warmed me up to the idea of using well known works as readymade elements for my own work.

Serkan Ozkaya – *We Will Wait* (2017)

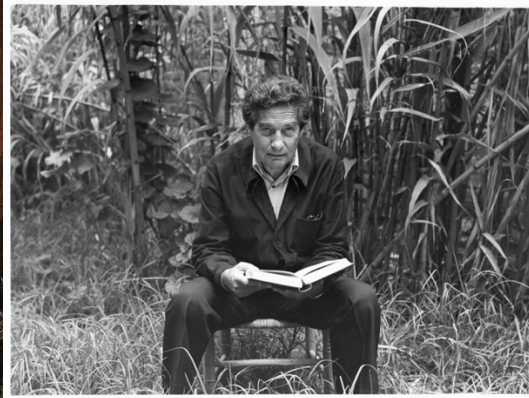


Furthering my dive to appropriation is Serkan Ozkaya. While researching Duchamp's final work, *Étant donnés*, I stumbled upon Ozkaya's reproduction. I was looking to it for ideas for spacing out a multiplanar piece in a larger scale.

The reproduction was so accurate, it took me a while to realize it was even a reproduction at all, and not just multiple views of the original. Looking into Ozkaya's rendition, I discovered it was his attempt to discover any secrets left behind by Duchamp in the composition, specifically a hidden self-portrait projected by repurposing the peephole as a camera obscura with light coming out from the piece onto a dark wall.

It occurred to me that although Ozkaya elevates his art by speaking about it as critical appropriation, the heart of his work lies in studies. This piece is a faithful reproduction, right down to the room, working in the same studio Duchamp created the piece in. This interested me in how such a study could be revered as a new artist's work. While I would not go so far as to create a study and call it my own, I admire the dedication to replicating the original's authenticity he hopes to achieve in looking at studies through the lens of appropriation. Now I began to see where a study could stand on its own.

Interdisciplinary research



William Morris - *The Lesser Arts of Life* (1882) and Octavio Paz - *Use and Contemplation*(1973)

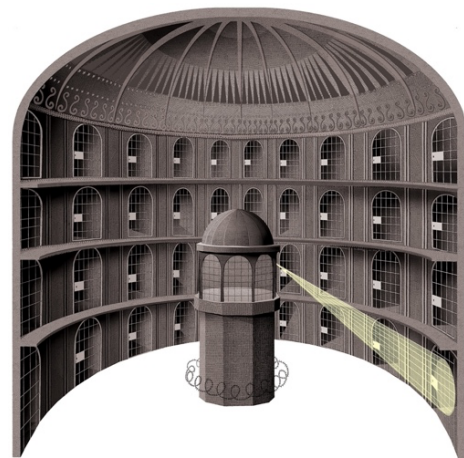
Formative texts for the importance craft, I started my research with both Morris and Paz. They both discuss the importance of hand-made goods as something inherently separate from the fine art object and the design tool, having less preciousness than the art object, yet-- as Paz continues the thought-- retain more aura from their creator than the cold replicated industrial designed tool.

Their conversations on craft speak more heavily on the useful, household craft object and its decorations, such as houses, chairs, and hand tools, rather than works made of fabric and craft-store supplies. Their writing is important to me nonetheless, as it separates craft from fine art, stressing craft not be elevated and understood in the same way as museum objects, but as something of their own value. Coming from a background of assisting my mother in vending in local craft shows, I would argue the conversational exchange in the trade off of the hand-made good is where the essence of a craft object lies. The stories exchanged alongside the good are just as important to the object's new owner. I've found this obsession to carry over to art history as

well, where the paintings we study are incredible formally, but their composition is not necessarily the only reason the paintings come up again and again, but rather the stories of controversy surrounding the work's conception that keeps the work relevant and alive.

Panoptic Architecture

I turned to panoptic architecture for ideas of display. This felt like a way to beautifully tie the themes of suffering and controversy surrounding the selected paintings to their display in my studios. The small, evenly distributed frames doubled as prison cells, containing each work for a central observer to monitor all at once. I considered going further with the display, lining every wall with a 3x3 square of containers to bring home the idea of these works being held captive, frozen in a snapshot of suffering and sized down from their original larger than-life scale for the average viewers to feel comfortable observing and critiquing with fresh eyes. As the work began to come together, I realized this concept distracted from the overall purpose. I was not critiquing the work or museums themselves, but rather asking to work *with* museums. I wanted to supply the inadequate text found in the traditional wall label with visual tools for the viewer to move around and come to their own conclusions about the work, be it new observations of a painting's form and composition or new interpretations of its content and themes.



Thus, the influence of the panopticon is manifested through the content, themes, and motifs of the works themselves, uniting with them through the shared element of suffering and oppression, but also through the physical orientation of the space and practical elements of display and viewing— as visitors view the works from their central position, the relationship changed through the confined frame and reduced scale.

It is not only the subject matter of the panopticon, but also the physical, spatial relationship it manifests which contribute to visitor reception and interpretation of the works—the viewing relationship is an essential part of the interpretation, transforming viewers into PART of that hypothetical interpretive wall text.

Primary Research

Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum

Lastly, regarding personal experience in the field, the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum has always been a big influence for its accessibility to learning through interactive activities. I've enjoyed the exhibitions as a child, experiencing and learning as the intended audience, and reflected on how streamlined they work as learning tools in revisiting as an adult. I've always

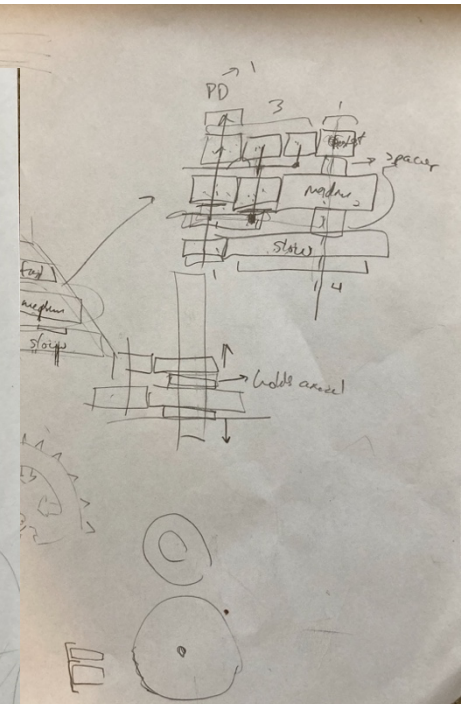
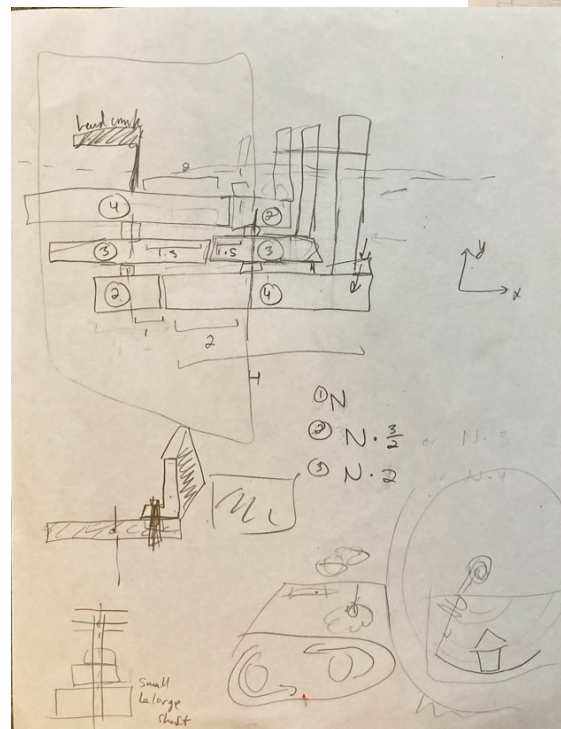
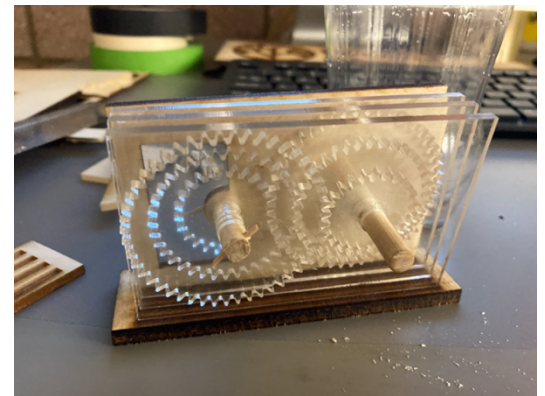
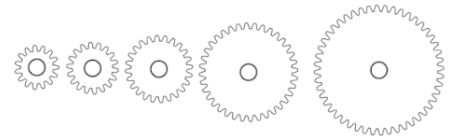
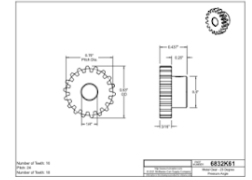
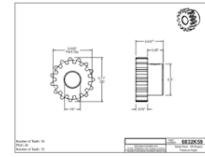


disliked the traditional museum for being too hands-off and the feeling of distance from artists work in the name of conservation. The Hands-On Museum has influenced me to seek ways to encourage viewer interaction, or at least to ask the viewer look more mindfully and come to their own conclusions, rather than accept at a glance.

Creative Process

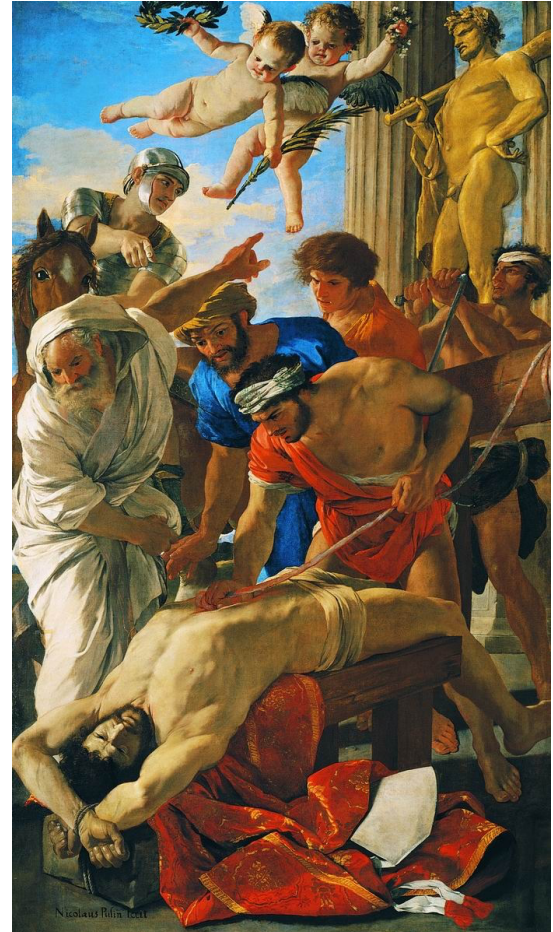
To take a step back from the research, I'd like to go through my making process. The two developed in tandem, however the number of stumbles that follow make it difficult to chronologize. I was very unsure my research and experiments were at all related for a long while as I continued to fail to produce a functioning piece that satisfied me.

The project started on a very different note, and the only consistent element from beginning to end was cut paper. I initially was looking at the eidophusikon, a theatric and folly device that brought a painterly effect to what was essentially a mechanized puppet show. From here, I studied automata, trying to create functional mechanical parts to make cut-paper studies move. I was ambitious in the number of varied devices I hoped to make, but the feat of learning fundamentals of engineering proved too complex for me to adequately comprehend within one semester. I tried laser cutting wood and acrylic to create gears for functional parts and met with engineering students to actualize the production of such contraptions. The entire semester was met with failure after failure, making me lose sight of what this project could amount to at all.



Alongside these trials, I had been conducting studies of classical paintings, starting with Nicolas Poussin's *The Martyrdom of Saint Erasmus* (1629). I picked this painting as a starting point for the composition. The figures were smushed into a tightly cropped frame and flattened so extremely it was hard to make out the scene for more than a blob. There was no sense of depth to the piece at all and any intended direction of line of sight was lost by in the business. This seemed a perfect candidate for turning into a cut paper study for both its flatness and my confusion as a viewer. I started in photoshop, separating each figure out, then going in and matching the artist's color and strokes as best I could to fill in the missing information from where the figures overlapped one another. The result was crude, but when cut out and placed in front of one another, it proved more deceptive than I had initially expected. Not many of my peers noticed that I had painted in the missing information at all, as the scale and quality of print helped to mask inconsistencies. When they overlapped one another, the mind seemed to fill in the gaps in a way that felt consistent to the original.

Experiencing the finished product personally, I noticed much more about the artist's intention in the composition as well. The sheer number of overlapping figures and lack of negative space kept me from perceiving a clear line of sight. Once separated out and given room to breathe with the added depth of field of separating the work along a plane, I could see



much more clearly the line from the tortured protagonist to the man in white pointing back to the golden statue of Nero.

Even after great reception from my instructors and classmates, I had still written off the work as anything more than a study. I was set on making something move, that I didn't think the work had any value unless I altered it with motion.

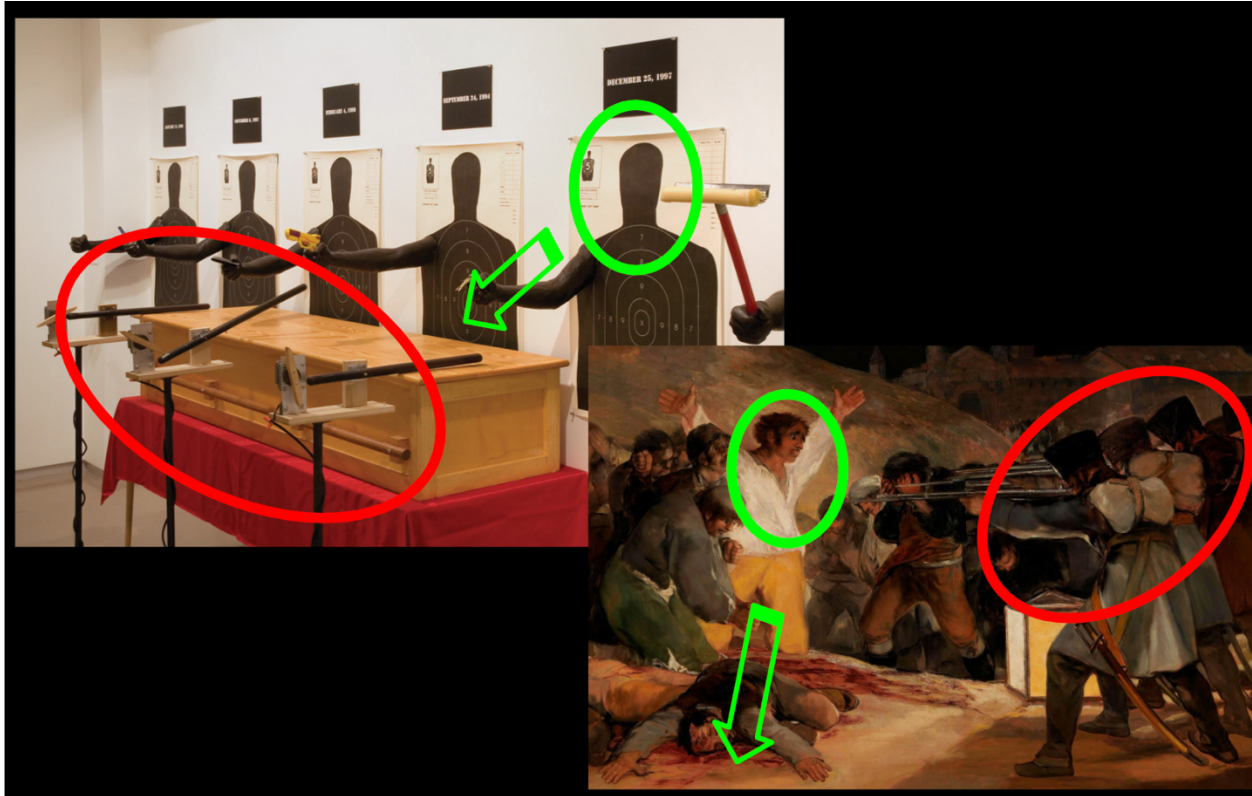


Mid process study of Nicolas Poussin, *The Martyrdom of Saint Erasmus* (1629)

At the same time, I had become very attached to Goya. I'd spent most of the semester analyzing the composition of Goya's *Third of May 1808* comparing it to other artists that may have been inspired by his composition. The composition alone took hold of all my interest. I wanted to pick it apart and understand every little detail and see how the vocabulary was repurposed so exactly by other artists discussing the subject of oppression.

I decided to look at Goya's composition with the same kind of exploded view as I had applied to Poussin's. I started by cutting evenly spaced grooves into a piece of wood, to use as a multi-planar device to visualize how far each layer should be spaced to provide the depth appropriate to the intended perspective of the original painting.

I continued this process, invested in matching the styles of the original works through digital painting, printed and hand-cut the separations, and assembled them using the prototyping board to figure out their staging, then gluing them to their own respective boards. The exercise in studying the original works was insightful, allowing me occasional peaks into the artists'



Comparative analysis of visual elements of Dread Scott's *Blue Wall of Violence* (1999) and Francisco de Goya's *Third of May 1808* (1814)

decisions that had otherwise gone unnoticed through regular observations. I discovered obscured figures with postures I had to estimate from others around them, questions of environment inconsistencies, and signs of laziness on the artists' part that they were able to get away with when thinking in 2D that was coming to light as a problem in 3D. For example, in Goya's work, there are two figures embracing one another hidden behind the protagonist. Who are these characters? Father and son? A couple? Everyone else around them seems to be male adults, implying they are all military. What could the relationship be being implied by these two figures? They are quite close to one another, implying a tight embrace cheek to cheek. I had to draw these figures over and over guessing what they might look like and hiding them again with the foreground figures to see what wouldn't work from this cropping. The same issue did not occur as much with Gericault. Almost all his figures were in full view, as if he was too proud of his sketches to allow any one of them to go unnoticed.

At first, I wasn't sure if there was much merit in creating dioramas highlighting key points one would learn in an art history class. As I continued to talk to classmates about the

project, I realized that what I thought was mostly common knowledge was largely absent from our curriculum. Even the school of art history, there's no core curriculum, western canon or otherwise. It was then that I began to realize just how important this could be as a learning tool, not just for my peers, but for the broader public. I could produce a visual learning tool that would allow people the freedom to explore a work visually, in line with the original's medium, yet also control the way in which visual information was presented to the viewer to allow them room to move around the work and gain new understandings from their observations.



Once the cut paper works had been assembled, I revisited the idea of moving parts. I still wanted the viewer to participate directly with the work. I tried multiple designs of enclosures to put around the work with which a pull tab could be attached for the viewer to slide a transparency up and down to view the work either unobscured or with the transparency in place. I made several mockups, but they all had issues either resetting or staying out of the way of the rest of the structure without getting cartoonishly oversized or blocking out too much light from the rest of the diorama. In the end I retained the framed look, leaving the transparency to sit stationary behind, giving the illusion that they were encased like a traditional natural history museum diorama while still being open to let in and allow the viewer freedom to view the work in the round.



Conclusion/ Reflection

All along my goal lay not within the confines of appropriation nor academic study, but somewhere in between. It took the influence of self-described appropriation artists like Serkan Ozkaya to open me up to the idea of playing with famous works, the tradition of academic study in old masters' art practice, and the deep dives in composition analysis found in an art history education to find where my project lied.

I was unsure of making art in the first place. In the end, I'd surprised myself by instead creating a proposal: a series of visual learning tools.

Looking ahead, I hope to see this project applied in a museum context. I have reached out to David Choberka, a curator at UMMA to ask for critique and feedback regarding the application of such a visual learning device in a museum setting. I aim to continue my studies in art history and museums to better understand how such visual learning tools could be more usefully applied. Choberka has already voiced excitement, in seeing an alternative to wall labels, as he has directly questioned the value and efficacy of text in museums. I am very hopeful to actualize this proposal and apply them inside of a museum context.

I plan to continue my studies in grad school, likely steering towards museums. In my own art practice, I am still curious to explore the functional use of moving parts in these types of studies and how such works could interact with one another with the addition of moving parts, as a living example of the art historic connections I have begun to make in my research thus far.

Thank you to my Integrated Project instructors this year. Robert Platt, Emilia White, Erin McKenna, Jennifer Metsker, and Barbara Pearsall have all been incredible guides through this process. I don't know how I would have come to the end of this project without any of you. You have all given me so many new avenues to research and explore and encouraged me every step of the way. This year was made especially difficult due to Covid and the loss of two of my peers. Thank you again for your understanding and support in helping me turn this project around into something that I could care about beyond the satisfaction of an assignment.

Sincerely,
Jacob N.

