



A Verb of
Movement,
Descriptors of
Uncertainty.

Gabriel Brower

This body of work tells a story of three spaces and the movements between them. Journeys through physical space are often used as a surrogate for a psychological or spiritual journey, and this body of work brings those inner and outer spaces together into a unified visual field. These eight woodcuts speak to the human desire to create order and seek meaning and stability amidst forces and change beyond individual will and comprehension. Printmaking, as the aesthetic and productive precursor to modern graphic media, has a rich history of narrative and visual storytelling. *A Verb of Movement, Descriptors of Uncertainty* draws on that past to explore dreams of new futures in an increasingly vast and uncertain world.

Gabriel Brower is a printmaker and woodworker who lives in Ann Arbor and grew up near Boston, Massachusetts. His work focuses on the complex relationship between humans and nature, and the desire to seek and create meaning in our lives. Gabriel finds the practice of working with wood to be a deeply spiritual experience. The patterns of wood grain in the carving blocks are incorporated into the images as an acknowledgment of the living beings without whom this work would not be possible.



Exhibition



I arranged the prints in the exhibition space to suggest a chronological journey. To create the feeling of entering into a new and separate area within the studios where the work is being exhibited, I made curtains out of scrap prints to frame the entrance of the space. The woodblocks are arranged beneath the window, and the prints are laid out in series from left to right with the doorway in the middle.

I was initially concerned that the layout of the space would interfere with how the works are read. However, the chronology of the pieces is more of a suggestion and the symmetrical layout of the space and the prints within it created a very aesthetically pleasing atmosphere that I think ultimately benefited the work.





The Prints are titled as follows from left to right: *Movement I*, *Movement II*, *Movement III*, *Movement IV*, *Movement V*, and *Movement VI*. The two works on the following page are titled *Entrance* and *The Overlook*



Precedents and Research

The Mothers, Käthe Kollwitz

This print by Käthe Kollwitz beautifully captures the feeling of isolation and terror from an unknown enemy. A solid black block of huddled torsos and faces peer out from the center of the image with two small children and a baby visible inside the protective embrace of the mothers. Kollwitz made this print in the inter-war years of Germany, reflecting the profound feeling of fear and loss of the non-combatants during the violence of war. The language of the mark making gives a feeling of heft and physical weight to the emotional weight of the image.

I have admired Kollwitz's work since I first learned about her in my high school art history class. I turned to her printed works to study how she uses the figure and the medium of woodblock print to convey the human face of turbulence and uncertainty. Existential threats and change are woven into the fabric of human history and experience, and I wanted to see what artists who lived through destabilizing times in recent history could teach me about portraying such complex and fraught emotions.



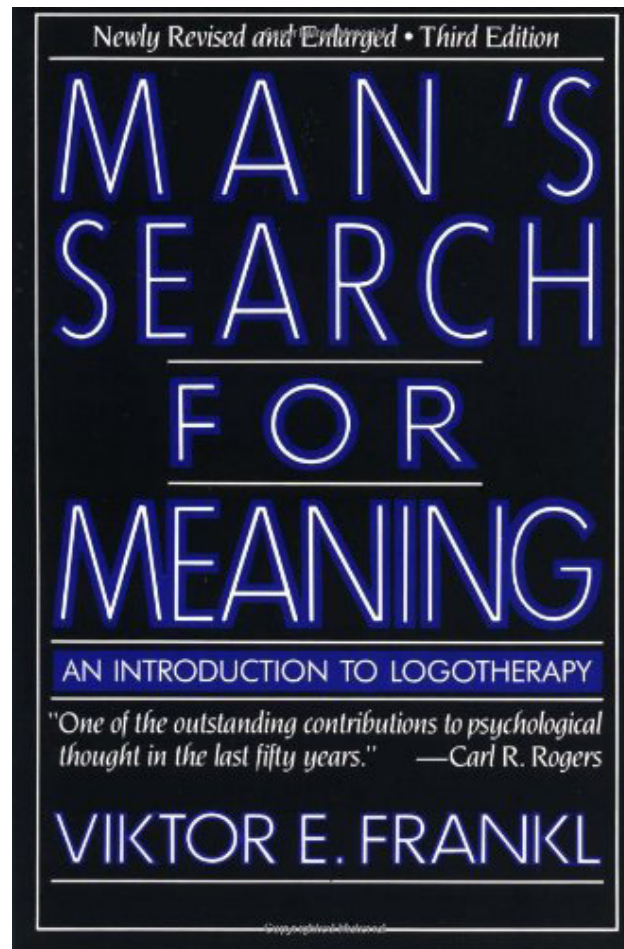
Utagawa Hiroshige's *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō.*

These prints were the first set of artworks I ever fell in love with. My family inherited a complete set of an edition printed around the end of WWII, which were originally purchased by my Great Uncle while he was a soldier stationed in Japan after the war. I felt that each of the images I looked at was vibrant with the humble pace of life. Sounds of human movement, weather, and conversation seemed to emanate from these snapshots of another world.

Using the same simple colors across the entire set of prints, Hiroshige observes the movement of humanity. The human subjects traveling Tōkaidō Road rarely dominate the image but are instead one element in a broader movement of land, architecture, water, boats, and sky. Each print truly felt like observation without judgment, placing busy travelers with important business in the vast context of the broader world. Each one seemed to say, “take your time and enjoy the journey. I promise there is no rush.”

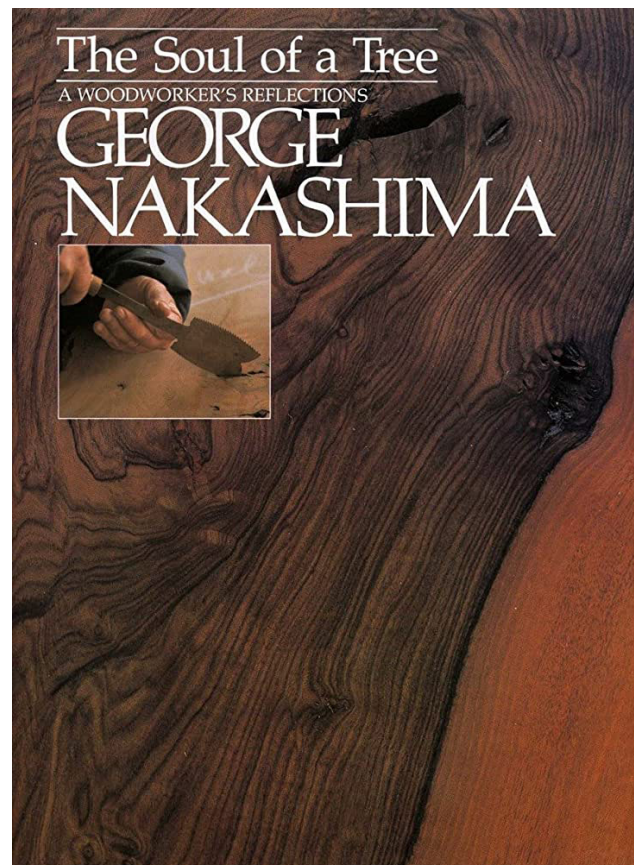
I have returned to these prints more times than I can count over the years, and they have served as an enduring source of inspiration for my creative practice, especially my printmaking. Some of my recent works, especially a print I'm currently carving, are formally influenced by the way Hiroshige arranges the various subjects in his compositions. There is always a visual harmony and conversation between the human world and the natural world, often with a feeling that our constructed reality is contained and held within the broader space of the earth, water, and sky.



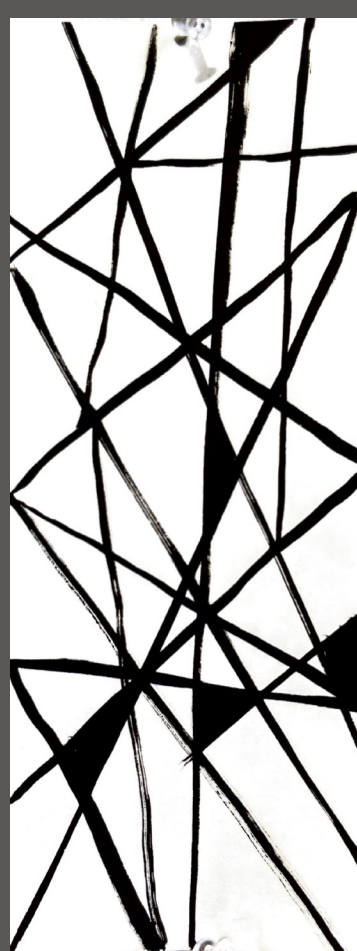
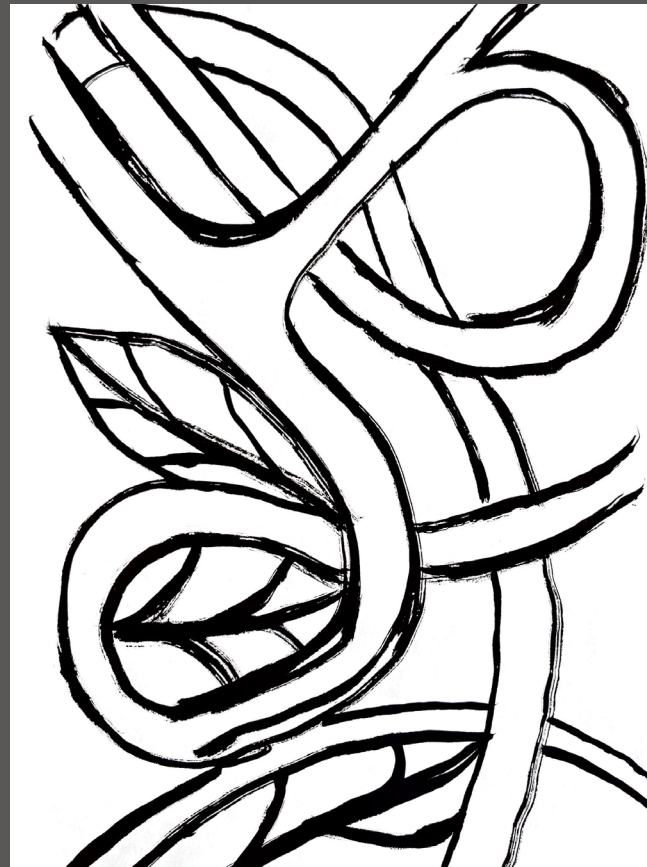


Viktor Frankl was a psychologist known for pioneering the therapeutic technique of logotherapy. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, he tells an intimate autobiographical story of surviving the Nazi concentration camps and how his experience shaped his understanding of human resilience and the way we construct meaning in our lives. Before reading this book, I didn't take the idea of truly creating my own meaning seriously. I assumed that people either chose to adopt a meaning structure like religion or accept that existence had no meaning or greater point. Neither end of that dichotomy sat well with me, though, and led to self-denial in the case of religion and depressive apathy in the face of meaninglessness.

Much of this project became about searching for meaning in my life, and sharing that search with others. The prints are images created out of searching for meaning—a subtractive process of finding the image amidst a flat surface of material. Over time, with each sliver removed in the same methodical process, the result reveals itself.



This beautifully meditative part memoir part philosophy book by woodworker and furniture maker George Nakashima. Nakashima tells his journey from novice to master woodworker and the creative and spiritual mentors who guided him. Core to Nakashima's philosophy is making as a karmic practice for spiritual development. He sees furniture as a way to give a tree a second life through new form. Woodworking is a collaborative process between the human being shaping the wood and the life, history, and soul contained in the wood as it is revealed to the craftsman. I found much common ground with the philosophy of *The Soul of a Tree*. The way Nakashima talks about woodworking as a karmic practice gave words to a feeling I have about my own creative desires and pursuits, but which I struggled to put into a coherent statement. I often approach art and design work from a problem solving and technical perspective, rather than from an emotional or spiritual center. That rationality and tightness comes out of a fear that my underlying drives and desires can't be justified in a "practical" manner. Fear of opening up emotionally has been one of the greatest barriers to my creative practice, and Nakashima's visual language in his furniture showed me that there are ways of expressing my beliefs and exploring complicated questions that don't have to directly reveal themselves in the objects that are created



Process and Ideation

I began IP coming back from a summer abroad studying furniture design in Copenhagen, and I thought I would use IP as a chance to learn more about woodworking and ultimately build a series of furniture pieces.

As an exercise to get myself working, I made small sumi ink brush paintings for the “50 things” assignment and quickly became aware of a gnawing sensation of uncertainty and unease which furniture design felt useless to express or explore. The small paintings took on a highly emotionally charged character, and the black and white images reminded me of woodblock prints.

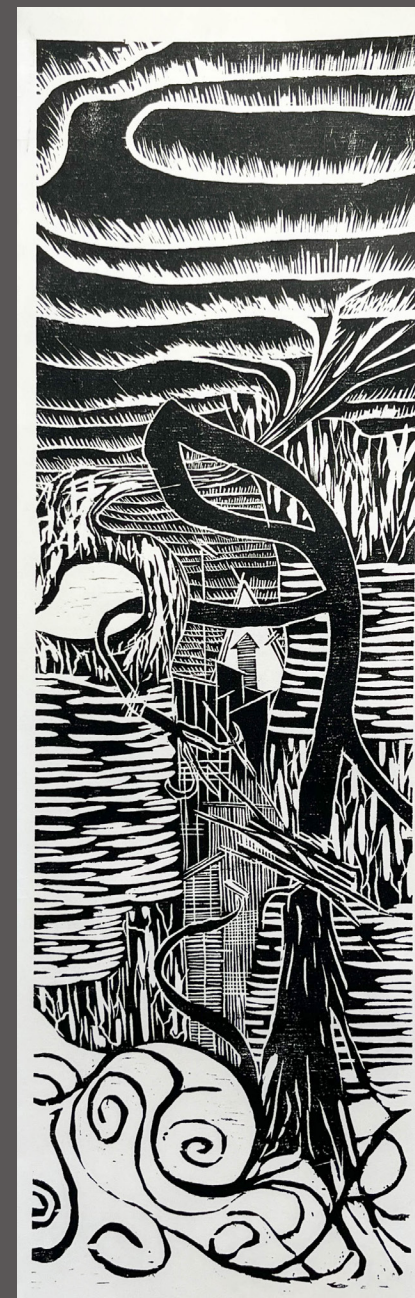
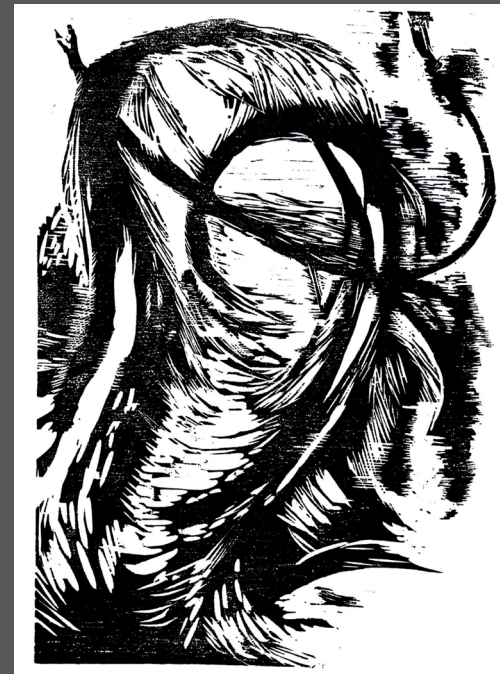
Printmaking is my artistic home, and has been since I carved my first piece of linoleum in high school. Returning to the block felt like the necessary next step even though it was outside of my original plan, and I created a number of prints over the course of the fall semester that came to define the rest of my work.

Exploratory Printmaking

These three images show a clear evolution and trajectory from the original small paintings to the final eight woodcuts in the exhibition. The first piece in the top left is hastily carved, and when I made it I felt a certain desperation that was aching to be let out onto the block. It's unrefined turbulence, a dynamic and liquid scene of uncertainty, had an energy that I would then channel and refine as I continued to create my work and do research.

The second print on the lower left introduced the tall vertical page, abstract figuration, and elements of architecture situated within a larger dynamic natural environment – all motifs that were used throughout the final series.

Lastly, on the right-hand side, I carved *The Traveler*. This print was the first large and more refined image I created. I continued to work with the vertical block shape, and also started to bring elements of the block's woodgrain into the composition of the image. Many of the carving patterns I used to render different elements of the terrain were further refined and used again in *A Verb of Movement, Descriptors of Uncertainty*.





It seems I cannot escape printmaking.

I am, however, happily trapped in this creative discipline. I've explored many other forms of art and design practice over the past six years of my undergraduate education, and I often strayed away from printmaking out of fear. Fear of financial insecurity, fear of misunderstanding or ridicule, or fear that I didn't "have what it took" to be an artist.

In many ways, *A Verb of Movement, Descriptors of Uncertainty* was created as an act of faith in myself. I needed to know what would happen if I let go of those fears and let flow what was so desperately trying to come out. It has completely transformed my practice and my understanding of myself and my abilities. Rather than facing the prospect of graduation and an artistic career with fear and trepidation, I'm eagerly looking forward to what comes next. The way that others have responded to this body of work has given me the confidence to continue onwards, create, and share more of my work with the world around me.

None of this happened in a vacuum. This project is the result of years of unseen failures, new beginnings, and the helping hands of friends, family, and mentors. I am forever grateful for their presence, guidance, and support.

Thank you.