Survive. Transform. Adapt.

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Thesis Introduction

I am interested in human conditioning and what it means to survive. I study the behaviors of carnivorous plants and fungi to find inspiration and the answers to life survival traits. As someone who chronically suffers from anxiety and PTSD, researching and creating fine artwork, such as printmaking, is most important to me to stay grounded.

In my research on carnivorous plants and fungi I focused on their growth and decay cycle. I was driven by my need to better understand the cycle of life and how fear may facilitate survival. It is through this study that I recognize my own survival traits. Fear is the catalyst for evolution, transformation and adaptation. Without fear there would be no survival and no means to evolve into a greater genius. I am intrigued how humans are conditioned to experience signs of fear when they think of plants capturing and eating insects and small animals, or that poisonous mushrooms can potentially be fatal if consumed. The following chapters focus on related research and exhibited artworks from SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.

Carnivorous Plants

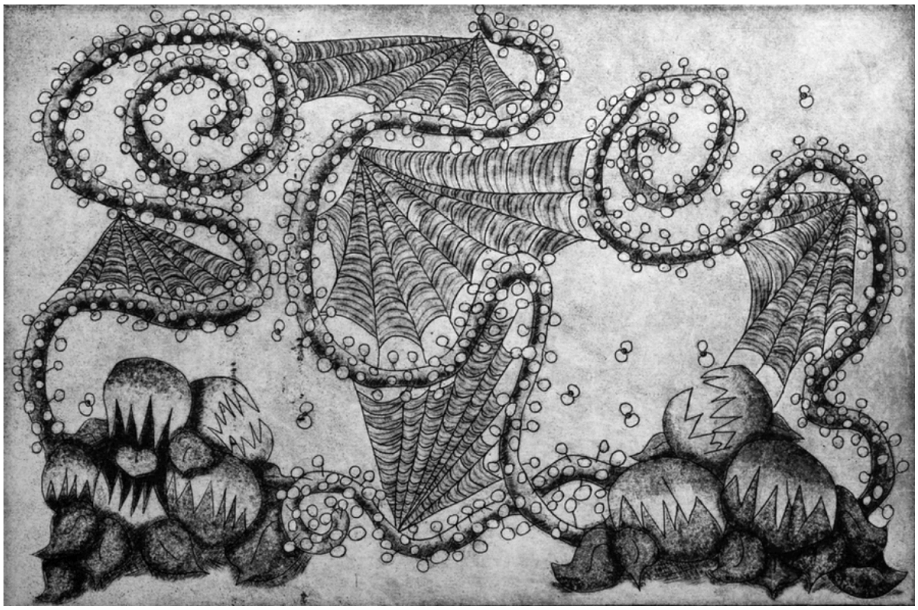
Unlike most of nature's creations, carnivorous plants thrive in nutrient-poor soil. These plants date back about 50 million years when the land of the Eocene Epoch[1] lacked in nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. Later, as the Earth flourished and fertile lands evolved, carnivorous plants eventually became extinct. The natural decay of organic matter increased the nitrogen content within the soil and made it inhabitable for carnivorous plants. However, carnivorous plants are reviving again due to the nutrient-depletion of our soil since the beginning of the industrial revolution.

The Venus Flytraps and Pitcher Plants represented in my artwork catch live food, such as small bugs and animals, to absorb nutrients. Venus Flytraps lure their prey into the trap and snatch shut when triggered by the prey's movement. Digestive enzymes help the Venus Flytrap absorb the nutrients from the prey, leaving a dried carcass behind. Pitcher Plants are shaped like vessels that hold sweet smelling water and digestive enzymes. When an unfortunate prey

[1] Mohdin, "First carnivorous plant fossil", https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn26646-first-carnivorous-plant-fossil-is-40-million-years-old/, para. 1

falls into the Pitcher Plant's vessel, it is unable to escape and eventually drowns while disintegrating.[2] The following Venus Flytraps and Pitcher Plants depicted within my artwork portray complex humanistic feelings of fear, humor, annoyance, and comfort.

Venus Flytrap Print 1



Fruit Flies, image size: 6"x9", aquatint, hard ground, 2019

Fruit Flies is an aquatint print that depicts a caricature of Venus Flytraps, sundews, and spider webs attempting to catch pesky flies for nutrients. This aquatint etching is a two-plate combination inspired by nature's botanical drive for survival. On the left and right bottom corners of the print, sit two bundles of hungry Venus Flytraps. A few open-mouthed Venus Flytraps await their chance to snap at a resting fly. Arising out of these bundles are lengthy sundews weaving and curling their sticky snares in hopes of catching the flies as well. Stuck amongst the sundews are remnants of the carnivorous plants' competitor, spider webs. With no spider to be seen, one might assume that it was eaten by one of the Venus Flytraps with a sealed trap.

[2] D'amato, "The Plants and How to Grow Them" in *The Savage Garden*, p. 93, para. 2-4

Venus Flytrap Concept

In her book, "The Second Sex", Simone de Beauvoir explores how society observes women as the weaker sex. Throughout history, dynamics and roles between the sexes have shifted from mutual respect to male superiority.[3] Women have been objectified in history and are often compared to delicate flowers that require masculine protection. Female sexuality is thus notoriously misunderstood and underestimated as weak and fragile. It was during the #MeToo 4th-wave feminist movement, that I realized how disgraceful it seemed for women to be compared to delicate flowers. As my own trauma resurfaced during this time, I imagined the fictional phenomenon of the Vagina Dentata,[4] gobbling up anyone who dared to violate women. Venus Flytraps are unique flowers. The Venus Flytraps' open traps and serrated teeth resemble that of a Vagina Dentata. Like the Vagina Dentata, Venus Flytraps snap upon touch.

Venus Flytrap Print 2

We Are The Flies, image size: 6"x9", mezzotint, 2019

[3] Beauvoir, "Part Two: History" in *The Second Sex,* audio book, ch. 2
[4] Koehler, "Pussy Bites Back", https://www.vice.com/en/article/payq79/pussy-bites-back-vagina-dentata-myths-from-around-the-world

We Are The Flies reflects the view from a fly's perspective after being captured by a Venus Flytrap. This image includes the viewer involuntarily. Here, the viewer plays the role as unfortunate prey looking out into a world of luscious leaves. The trap's teeth distort the prey's view with no way out. Life grows dark as the trap closes in on the viewer.

Pitcher Plant Prints 1-2

I found intriguing examples of beneficiary synergies between nocturnal animals and Pitcher Plants. *Two Bats and a Pitcher Plant* refers to an example of synergistic behavior. Very large Pitcher Plants will provide safe shelter for bats, while the bats in turn reciprocate by leaving their feces for nutrition.[5] The print below depicts a flying bat in salutation with a Pitcher Plant. Within the Pitcher Plant's vessel hangs another bat comfortably nestled within the

Two Bats and a Pitcher Plant, image size: 9"x12", aquatint, hard ground, sugar lift, spit bite, 2019

[5] Simon, "Carnivorous plants attract bats", https://www.fau.eu/2015/07/20/news/research/carnivorous-plants-attract-bats-with-echo-reflectors/, para. 1

plant's protection. The circular motives within the background mimic echolocation sound waves utilized by bats to navigate their surroundings.

Entanglement, image size: 12"x9", aquatint, photo etching, 2019

Entanglement is inspired by the intertwining of dangling Pitcher Plants that I noticed in the Albuquerque Botanical Gardens. This two-plate combination print shows two pitcher plants interconnecting with themselves and their surroundings signifying the complexity of all life form relations with the connecting matter. Separating the two Pitcher Plants from the tangled background is an auric moon that places the spotlight on the binding of the two plants.

Biomorphic Surrealism

I refer my aesthetic style as biomorphic surrealism. Biomorphic (Greek) translates to 'life form".[6] This term refers to abstracted images of biological plants, animals, and their behaviors. According to the Tate Museum[7], "Surrealism aims to revolutionize human experiences" through an artists' discovery in "magic and strange beauty in the unexpected and the uncanny, the disregarded, and the unconventional". While much of the artwork reflected in this thesis are prints, I share a few oil paintings in a biomorphic surrealist style.

Pitcher Plant Paintings 1-3

Carnivorous plants are a contemporary species and researchers have yet to discover ancient works in relation to them. It is for this reason that I felt drawn to paint works inspired by carnivorous plants and notable stories that speak against toxic masculinity. These vibrant impasto paintings display layers of complementary colors and patterned black and white

[6] The Tate Museum, "Biomorphic", https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/b/biomorphic
[7] The Tate Museum, "Surrealism", https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/surrealism

triangles. The paintings, *Mama Marie*, *Three Sisters,* and *Lilith* are all mixed representations of Pitcher Plants and human sex organs.

Mama Marie is inspired by a voodoo priestess from Congo[8] whose intentions were either to bring distressed lovers back together in harmony, or to sever an abusive relationship. Loved and fearfully respected, *Mama Marie* floats in transcendence in an effort to balance masculine and feminine energies. Her content posture, voluptuous lips and hanging tarse tongue mimics that of a satisfied plant.

Mama Marie, 24”x18”, oil on canvas, 2023

Three Sisters, 24”x18”, oil on canvas, 2023

In honor of the Fates[9], *Three Sisters* represent the divine oneness and are responsible for assigning the destinies of all beings, including the mythological Gods. Depicted within *Three Sisters* are three pitcher plants connected at the base of the stems. Each vessels’ body exposes the fleshy insides of the plant in a lovecraftian manner, while luminous colors pulsate the curvy areas of each body, indicating life from within.

[8] Lister, “Voodoo & Vodou” in *Betwixt The Sheets*, podcast
[9] T. Editors, “The Fates”, https://www.greekmythology.com/Other_Gods/The_Fates/the_fates.html

Lilith, 24"x18", oil on canvas, 2023

Lilith is widely recognized as a sexual temptress who was intended to be Adam's first wife. Unfortunately, Adam banned *Lilith* from the Earth because she insisted on equality within their marriage.[10] Alert with caution and warning, *Lilith,* stands erect. Unable to physically see visuals, her forked tongue gently glides from underneath her glans to smell what is going on before planning her next move.

In my quest to understand the core of toxic masculinity and how to overcome it, I felt the need to focus more on the nurturing aspects of masculinity. In ancient mythologies, goddesses, or the Devine feminine, were often worshipped in celebrations involving mushrooms, especially those containing psychedelic properties. With its penetrative phallic structures, mushrooms have historically been symbolic of masculine protection and fertility. The next paragraphs reflect some of my research and creative process on Fungi.

Fungi

Fungi date back about 1 billion years ago and vary greatly from edible to medicinal to fatal. The fungi, or mushrooms, that we see are the fruit of mycelium. Mycelium is the common thread which connects all organisms.[11] Scientists recognize mycelium to be responsible for all life and death on this planet as it is substantially involved in the breakdown of deceased matter to create the basis for new growth. The mushrooms that we find on occasion are thus a fleeting glimpse of nature at work as their life span varies from just a couple of hours to a few days.

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[10] Gadon, "The Uncontrolled Sexuality of Lilith" in *The Once and Future Goddess,* p. 123
[11] Stamets, "Mycelium" in *Fantastic Fungi* , p. 19, para. 3

Mushroom Prints

Octopus Mushroom is a three-plate combination etched with two photo polymer plates and a collagraph in-between. The image depicts an octopus mushroom emerging from it's egg-like sac in preparation for reproduction. This mushroom is detached from the dry, cracking soil because it does not grow on dry land. The yellow and purple colors suggest a sense of urgency, and an absolute detachment from the earth. Still, it's oozing, slimy spores are ready to spread in an attempt for this species to thrive in an inhabitable climate.

Octopus Mushroom image size: 12"x9", photo etching, collagraph, 2020

Texture and layers are an important aspect of my artwork. Below are three variations of *Octopus Mushroom* that was achieved by using a three-plate combination. As I work, I enjoy feeling the contour lines and grooves. I imagine the matrices to be the essence of a living entity. When printed, these entities sprout to life in many beautiful and various ways, each taking on a personality of it's own.

Octopus Mushroom variations, image sizes: 12"x9", photo etching, collagraph, chin colle, 2020

Fungi assist in the natural cycle of decay and regrowth. Dead Man's Fingers is a print installation inspired by the Xylaria species. These are fatally poisonous and easily adapt to their environments, making them versatile and bountiful around the world.[12] [13]

Dead Man's Fingers, 7x12', collagraph, linocut, print installation, 2023

The bugs depicted are hand printed linoleum stamps. Flies, arachnids, and nematodes scatter from below and at the base of the fungi. The colorful and abundant *Dead Man's Fingers* strive to reach for the highest point possible. The fungi's patterns mimic it's viscous mycelium. Without the confinement of a traditional frame, this installation invites viewer participation and evokes curiosity for the material as the viewer walks alongside the wide spread growth of fungi. In creating *Dead Man's Fingers,* I chose to use collagraph matrices to print from that were also displayed and used in the exhibition.

[12] Roehl, "Ecology"in *Xylaria polymorpha* https://www.fungusfactfriday.com/005-xylaria-polymorpha/,
[13] Sierralupe, "Xylaria Species" in *The Miraculous Mushroom 2021 Calendar*, March 2021

Collagraphs allow for an intaglio/relief printing combination. This was a conscious decision to explore the matrices' texture and boundaries, all while testing various ways of achieving printing results. The matrices were crafted from matte board, egg shells, and used coffee grinds. It seemed fitting to create these mushroom inspired prints using organic material that will also eventually decay and sprout on it's own.

Collagraph matrices display

Not only did I have these matrices on display, but I also placed some out for the interactive station. The interactive station silently invited the exhibition's audience to explore with oil pastels and matrices to create rubbing prints of their own.

Interactive rubbings station with oil pastels and ready made collagraph matrices

Thesis Exhibition

SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT. encompasses artworks related to my research on carnivorous plants and fungi survival traits. I am interested in various behaviors necessary for survival. I am also intrigued how humans are conditioned to experience signs of fear when they think of plants capturing and eating insects and small animals, or even poisonous mushrooms can potentially be fatal if consumed. Fear is the catalyst for evolution, transformation and adaptation. Without fear there would be no survival and no means to evolve into a greater genius.

As a process-oriented artist, I enjoy problem solving challenges. This thesis has challenged me to dive deeper into my research and into printmaking. Printmaking allows for creative problem solving and invites collaboration, thus interconnecting with others. The labor-intensive work reduces symptoms of my anxiety as I am required to stay present and in the moment. It forces me to breathe, work hard, and take breaks accordingly until I've reached satisfactory results. This repetitive process is meditative and the results provide immediate feedback guiding me closer to mastering techniques and the desired outcome.

The installation of the exhibition is an artwork in and of itself. It is also labor intensive and requires my undivided attention to detail and use of space as to entice the audience to walk in, explore and leave with lingering curiosity. The following pages shows photographs of SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT., my BFA honors thesis exhibition.

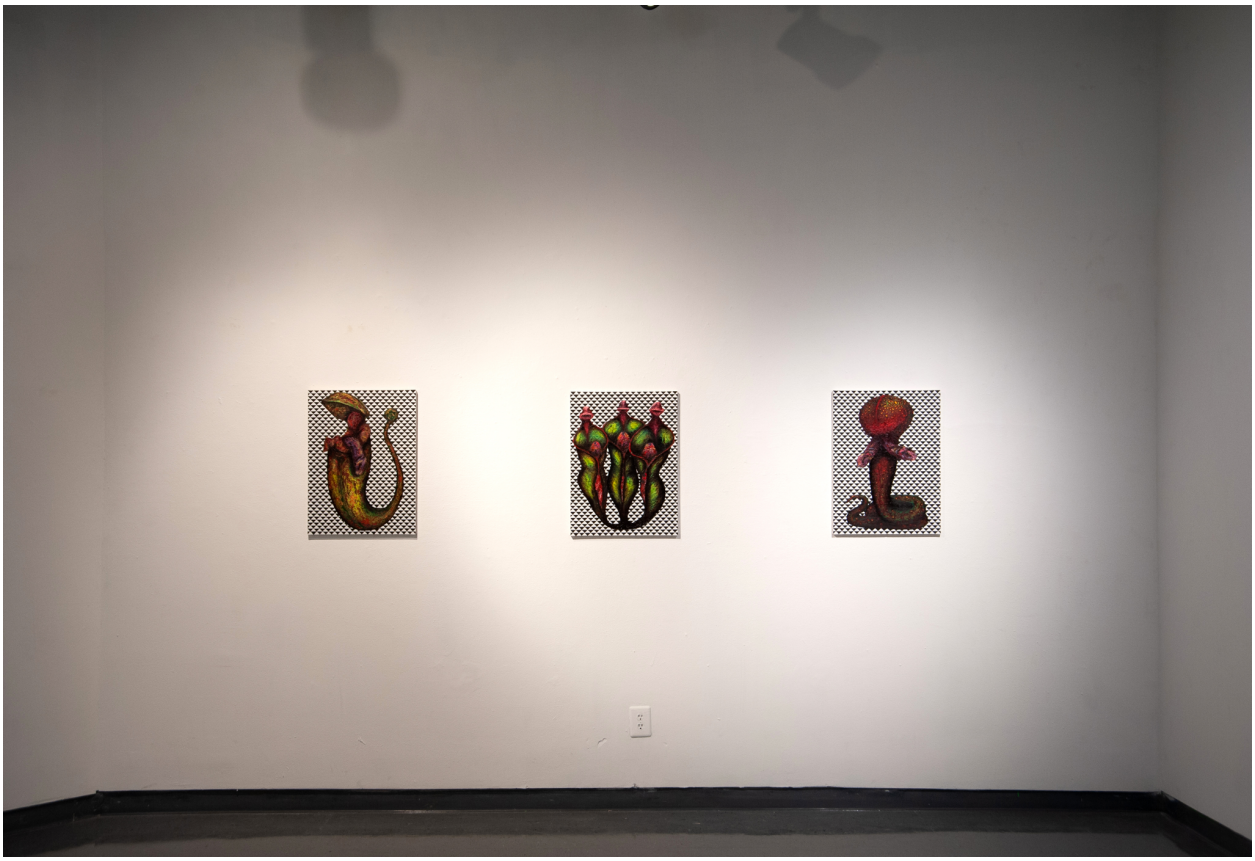
Installation view 1
Left: Dead Man's Fingers, 7x12', collagraph, linocut, print installation, 2023. Right: collagraph matrix display SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico

Installation view 2
Left: Mama Marie, 24”x18”, oil on canvas, 2023.
Middle: Title, artist cards, exhibit info binder and collagraph matrix display.
Right: Octopus Mushroom image size: 12”x9”, photo etching, collagraph, 2020
SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico

Installation view 3
Left: Fruit Flies, image size: 6”x9”, aquatint, 2019.
Middle: Two Bats and a Pitcher Plant, image size: 9”x12”, aquatint, sugar lift, spit bite, 2019.
Right: We Are The Flies, image size: 6”x9”, mezzotint, 2019.
SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico

Installation view 4
Left: Oil paintings of Mama Marie, Three Sisters, and Lilith.
Middle: Print variations of Octopus Mushroom, and exhibition display.
Right: Interactive rubbings station and collagraph matrix display
SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico

Installation view 5
Left: Entanglement, image size: 12”x9”, aquatint, photo etching, 2019
Middle: Two Bats and a Pitcher Plant, and We Are The Flies
Right: Dead Man’s Fingers, 7x12’, intaglio/relief print installation, 2023.
SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico



Installation view 6
Left: Mama Marie, 24”x18”, oil on canvas, 2023.
Middle: Three Sisters, 24”x18”, oil on canvas, 2023.
Right: Lilith, 24”x18”, oil on canvas, 2023.
SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico

Installation view 7
Left-Right: Octopus Mushroom variations, image sizes: 12”x9”, photo etching, collagraph, 2020
SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico

Installation view 8
Interactive rubbings station and collagraph matrix display
SURVIVE. TRANSFORM. ADAPT.
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico

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