

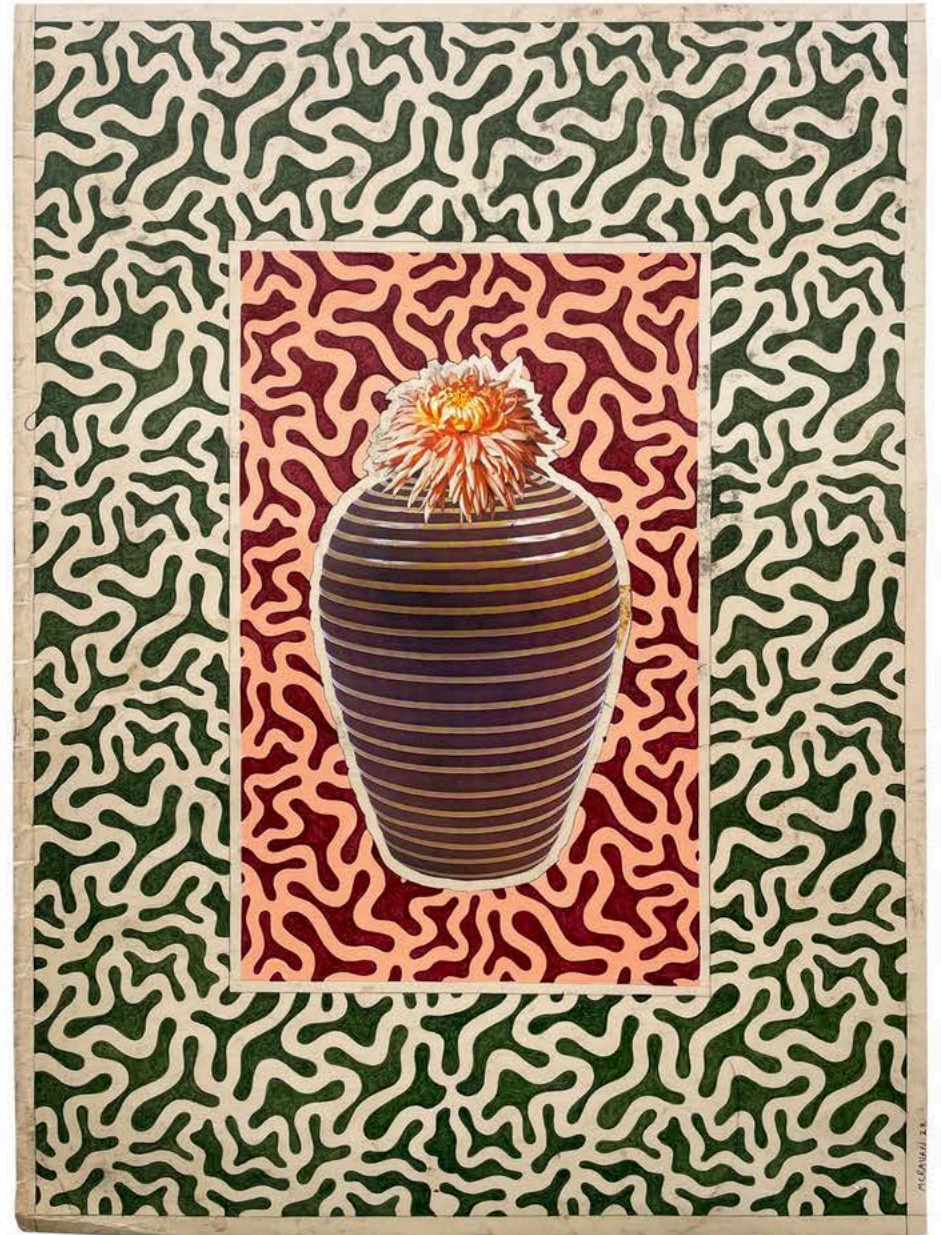
**Matthew Craven**

***EPIGENESIS.***

May 2023

Ampersand is pleased to present *EPIGENESIS.*, an online exhibition of 12 new drawings and an interview with artist Matthew Craven, whose work has previously been featured here at Ampersand in his exhibitions *Lifelines* in 2018, *NETWORK* in 2019 and *RELIQUARY.* in 2021. A native of Michigan who currently lives and works in Oakland, California, Craven received his MFA from The School of Visual Arts, New York. His work has been widely exhibited in group and solo exhibitions, including recently at Asya Geisberg Gallery (New York), Hashimoto Contemporary (San Francisco), David Shelton Gallery (Houston) and Bass & Reiner (San Francisco). A forthcoming solo exhibition is scheduled for mid-September at Hashimoto Contemporary in Los Angeles.

**“HUMANS HAVE ALWAYS MADE THINGS BY HAND TO PROVIDE COMFORT, TO WARM US, TO PRAY TO—ALL THESE THINGS MAKE US FEEL LIKE WE ARE NOT ALONE IN THE WORLD. I’M FASCINATED BY OUR NEED TO CREATE AND I’M ALWAYS SEARCHING MY SOUL TO FIND MY PLACE WITHIN THESE TRADITIONS.”**



*CAMOUFLAGE.*, 2023

Ink and found image on found paper

15 x 11 inches

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**AMPERSAND:** I first encountered your drawings in 2014 at VOLTA New York, which is an interesting art fair in that each gallery presents the work of just one artist. Out of all the visual noise I had experienced that particular day, I distinctly remember an immediate feeling of calm and cohesion amidst your work. And it also imparted a sense of confidence and originality that was mostly lacking in the fair as a whole. Had you been working in that style for long? Was there a distinct moment in your efforts when you thought you were really on to something?

**CRAVEN:** Well, first, thank you. It's cool to hear your thoughts and know that you still remember how you felt seeing that series of work almost a decade ago. I first started working in that direction in graduate school and my style was definitely developing quickly at the time. For Volta, I was using specific themes, colors, patterns and materials to make the overall presentation feel unified. I wanted it to look like a lost room in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I had also just found an incredible resource for large vintage paper—the backs of old oversized movie posters. It was definitely a big moment, a point where I felt like I found my niche and, ultimately, my primary material of choice that I've been using to this day.

**AMPERSAND:** I get the impression that your work is primarily material driven. In other words, it's not like you think up a new visual idea and then go find materials that support it. Instead, perhaps you always allow found materials to either direct or inspire an idea. But it also seems as though you repeatedly go back to a common source once you've found it. Say, for example, a secondhand book that is rich in the types of found images that are prevalent in your collage. How did that whole process start and how has it evolved?

**CRAVEN:** There was definitely a moment when I decided to only use old paper and discarded textbooks in my work. Since all the work at this time was dealing with human history, I wanted the materials I used to have their own history as well. It gives the work a distinct warmth that only evidence of passed time and human touch provides. I had established a set of visual "rules" for myself, but the element of looking for images to inspire the work was an equally important step in developing my aesthetic. A big part of it was needing something in my daily routine to get me out of my studio and into the world. I started going to used bookstores as often as I could, searching for these moments and sources of inspiration. There's a thrill in stumbling upon an old book filled with beautiful vintage images—it's always the moment that work begins. This element of chance has kept my practice surprising and flexible and in tune with new ideas.



*FLUTTER/ HOVER.*, 2023 — [Purchase >](#)



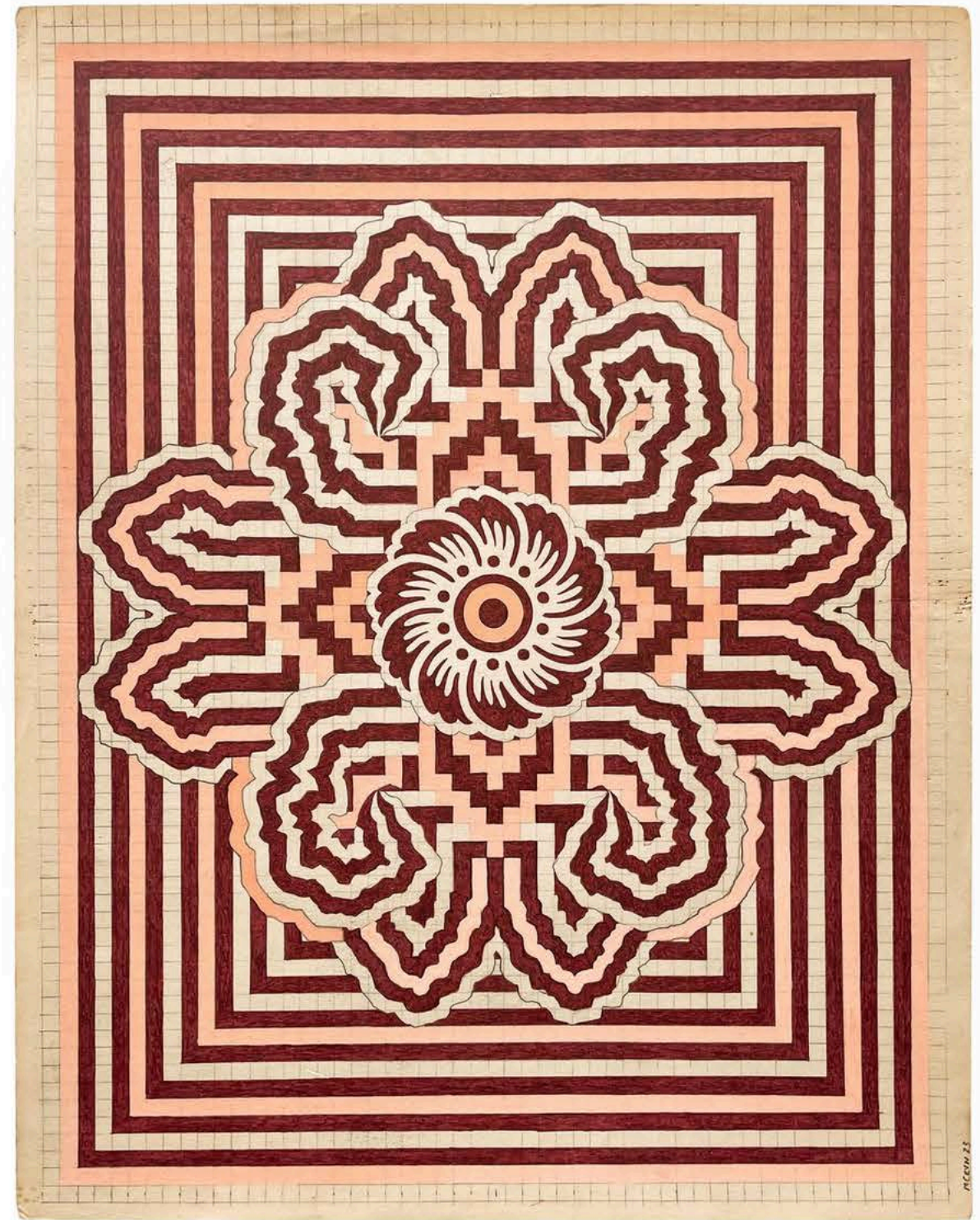
**AMPERSAND:** Most of your pieces function both as drawings and collage, but perhaps you don't even differentiate between the two. The drawn element is always pattern-based and seems like it could be rooted in visual research that you might pursue. Perhaps not entirely ethnographic, but maybe something that is more impressionistic or even unconscious for you at this point. A process of finding and re-contextualizing, but without dictating a specific meaning or adhering to the parameters of any one tradition. As a result, there's often an element of ambiguity in your finished pieces—something that is familiar and unfamiliar at the same. Are these dichotomies intentional or is it more a function of all the parts as a whole?

**CRAVEN:** I do feel like they are different ways to express the same ideas. Much like the way I created an element of my practice that involves getting out into the world in search of materials, I developed different studio techniques so that I have multiple ways to work once I'm in the studio. To be honest, some days I don't feel like drawing, so I'll cut out images instead, or just organize the images I have already cut to come up with new ways of looking at them. Not every day feels the same in my studio, so I like to have options to help me stay creative and productive. As far as the patterns go, it initially began as a response to the cultures I was exploring in the earliest collage work. I would notice little patterns on the base of sculptures or different textiles from different civilizations. What I took from all of this was how similar the use of pattern is by most societies throughout history. And also how simple patterns are when reduced to their most basic elements. Color, shapes and sizes in different combinations create entirely new imagery. Making patterns turned out to be second nature for me, since I had been drawing stream of consciousness imagery since I was a child. So, yeah, it's always a process of finding, both materials and inspiration—but the trick is making something new out of what I find.

*BOTANY/ BUST.*, 2023 — [Purchase >](#)

**AMPERSAND:** I tend to engage with your work on a visceral or sensual level. Your patterns release a distinct form energy that centers me in a given piece. The collage elements feel like a form of narrative, something more akin to imagination. But the true pleasure, for me, is studying the subtle richness of your mark making and cutting—trying to figure out how a piece goes together. But I'm also aware that others might approach your drawings with a more analytical or cognitive approach, trying to figure out what you are trying to say—questions about socio-political conditions, race and culture, imperialism and the lasting influence of antiquity. Your work definitely lends itself to both types of reading, but I'm curious how you view it. Or, to phrase it another way, what frame of mind are you in when you are making work? Is it on more of a visual or analytical plane?

**CRAVEN:** I think in both cases, either visceral or cognitive, the work gives me a feeling of comfort. Humans have always made things by hand to provide comfort, to warm us, to pray to—all these things make us feel like we are not alone in the world. I know I'm drawn to handmade objects. I'm fascinated by our need to create and I am always searching my soul to find my place within these traditions. I jokingly refer to my work as "painfully hand crafted" because of the meticulous way I make marks and also the tedious process of cutting out collage elements. All of this is done with the intention of not being "perfect." Instead, I allow my work to be "flawed" in the specific way that only something made by my hands can be.

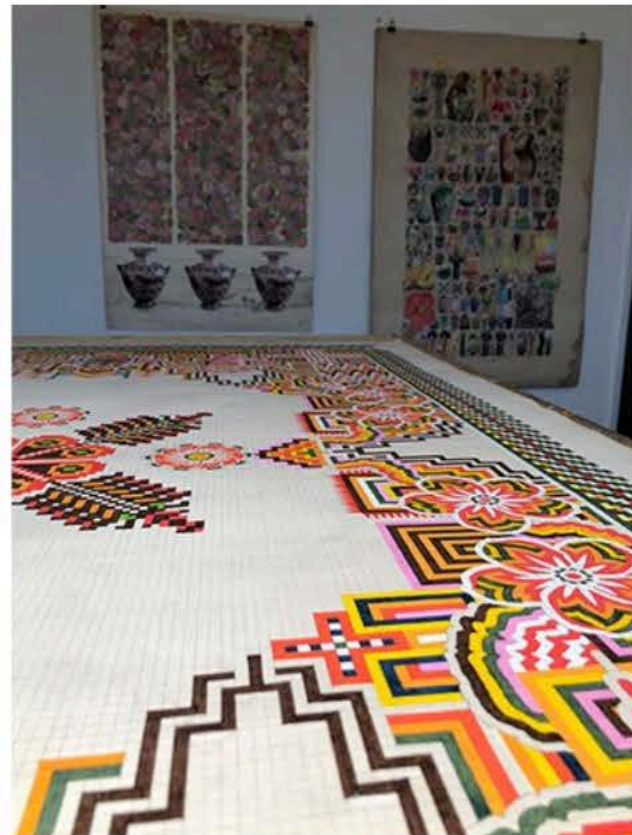
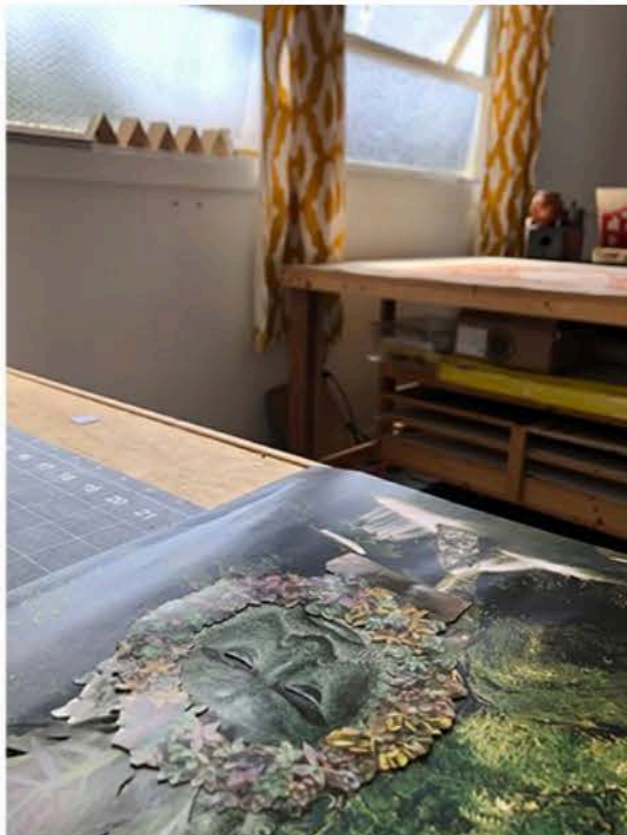


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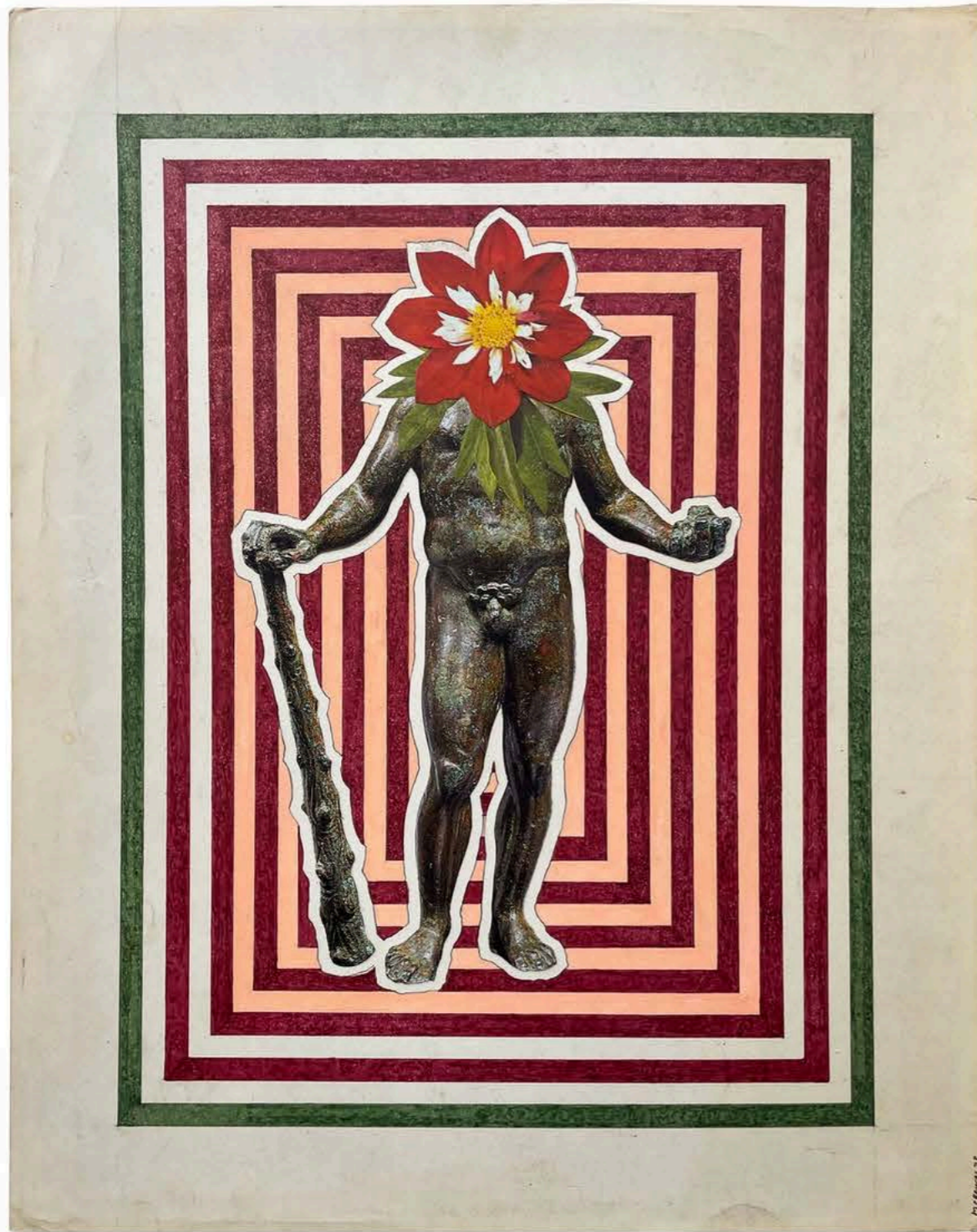
**CRAVEN (continued):** In regards to the last part of your question, I'm constantly trying to learn and grow as an artist, and a part of this is seeing or hearing how others interpret the work. The analytical elements of the work have always been very important, but the nuances of the imagery means different things to different people. Looking back, I see how there were times when I put concepts aside to focus on the visual composition. In the past, my practice was so insular and idiosyncratic that I was getting a little lost in my own narratives and the concepts I was trying to create. In a way, I wasn't fully honoring what made some of the found images so powerful to me in the first place. One thing the pandemic allowed for was time to really analyze what I had been doing the last decade or so, and also consider where I wanted to take my work going forward. I came away from that time recognizing that my work is strongest when I focus deeply on the elements that are very personal to me—also knowing, at the same time, that a finished piece might mean something entirely different to others.



GERMINATE., 2023 — [Purchase >](#)



*Outtakes from Craven's studio.*



THE BOTANIST., 2023 — [Purchase >](#)

**AMPERSAND:** For this new exhibition of drawings, *EPIGENESIS.*, the imagery is mostly centered on plant material and flowers. Even the pattern work feels more organic, for lack of a better word. Your titles, as well, reference aspects of plant evolution or systems that humans have created to produce and/or arrange plants both for consumption and visual pleasure. Organic materials, like rocks and mushrooms, have appeared in your work in the past, but this new focus on vegetation seems to be more deliberate and condensed. How did this come about? Is it purely a visual shift or conceptual as well?

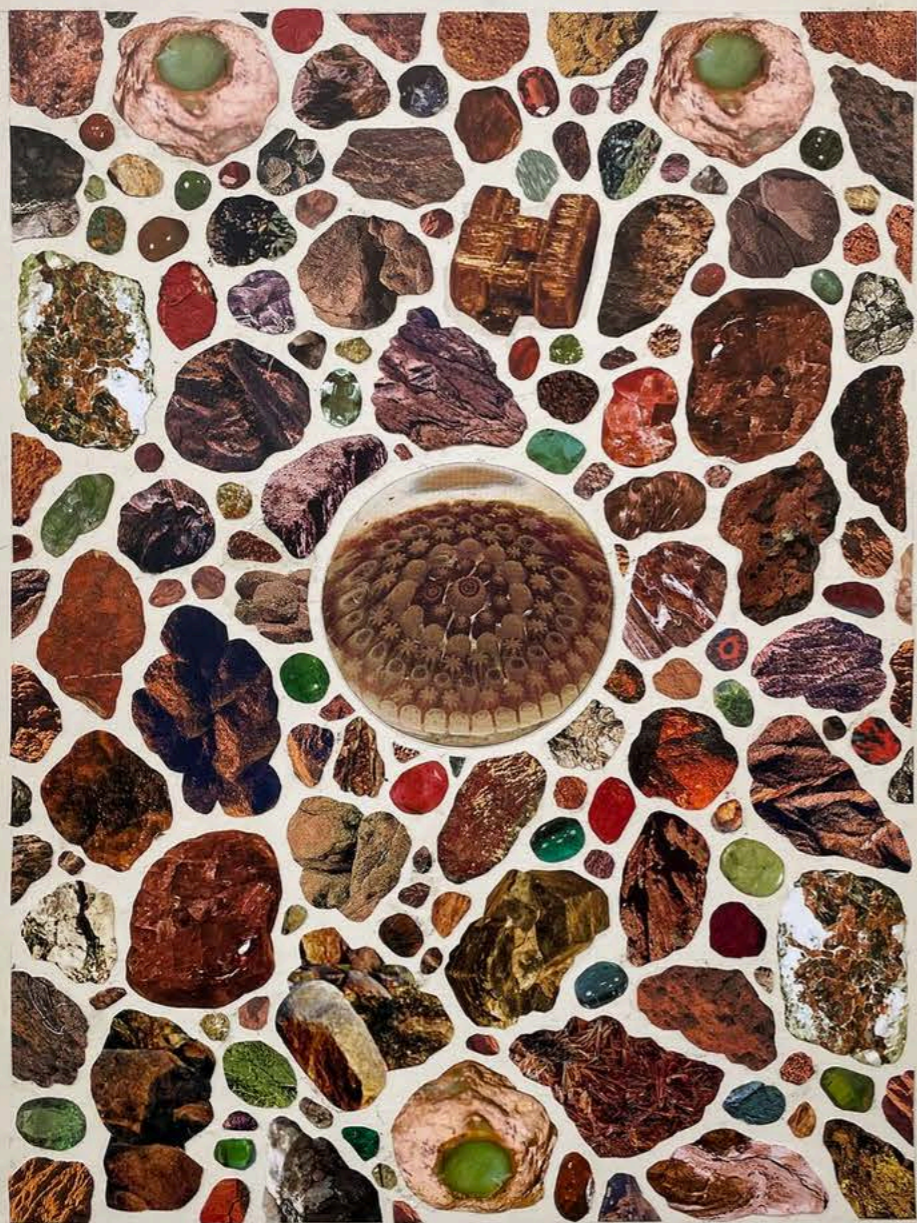
**CRAVEN:** My partner, Tosha, and I moved to the Bay Area in March of 2020. A week after signing an apartment lease, Covid shut the world down. For the first time in a very long time, as I mentioned, I had a moment of pause and was able to think about my work in a real way. Simultaneously, when we were shut inside, our only respite was going on long walks. This was when I discovered the vast number of botanicals that grow wild right outside our door. Around this time, Tosha also started foraging for flowers and bringing them home to create floral arrangements—which also led to her starting her new career as a florist. She shares a lot of her work on Instagram if you want to check it out ([@saintfloraco](#)). This process of being exposed to all the colors and shapes of the flowers, really studying them, was similar to how I analyzed patterns when first making work focused on historical imagery. I fell in love with how complex yet delicate flowers are. They're organic and ephemeral, the exact opposite of the cultural artifacts I had used as inspiration in the past. I was thinking a lot about time and the idea of permanence, how it's portrayed in my work, so flowers and plants function as a perfect contrast in this regard.



**AMPERSAND:** Your exhibition title, *EPIGENESIS.*, could also serve as a metaphor for the development of an artist in general. In other words, for a lot of artists I talk to, there seems to be an initial creative "seed" in youth that then develops through a succession of different periods of creative growth. And that growing, ideally, never really stops. Did you draw or make things as a kid? If so, do you remember a specific time you started doing it? And how did it evolve from there? Taking cues from other kids that made drawings, how-to books, teachers? Was there a point where you became aware that art was something you could do in earnest? Or that within society there were people who worked as artists?

**CRAVEN:** I was always drawing as a kid, so I suppose my art journey started like most others. It was my safe haven during a somewhat traumatic upbringing. It was always a place that gave me self-confidence. I never took art classes or even considered it to be "Art," but it was a big part of my childhood. After that, though, I lost track of any kind of artistic pursuit for many years. It wasn't until I got to college that I even realized art was a subject of study I could pursue. Once again, it gave me something to focus on when I was a little lost in the world with no sense for what my future might be. It instilled in me, for the first time, a true sense of self and gave me an identity I was proud of.





**AMPERSAND:** You've lived and made work in New York, Los Angeles and now in Oakland. Would you say a sense of place impacts or influences your work? Here I'm thinking of access to source materials, energy sources from the surrounding environment or impact on your mental frame of mind. Or, from a different angle, the notion (which is perhaps a myth) that an artist must live in a city that is "more aligned" with the "art world," like New York or LA.

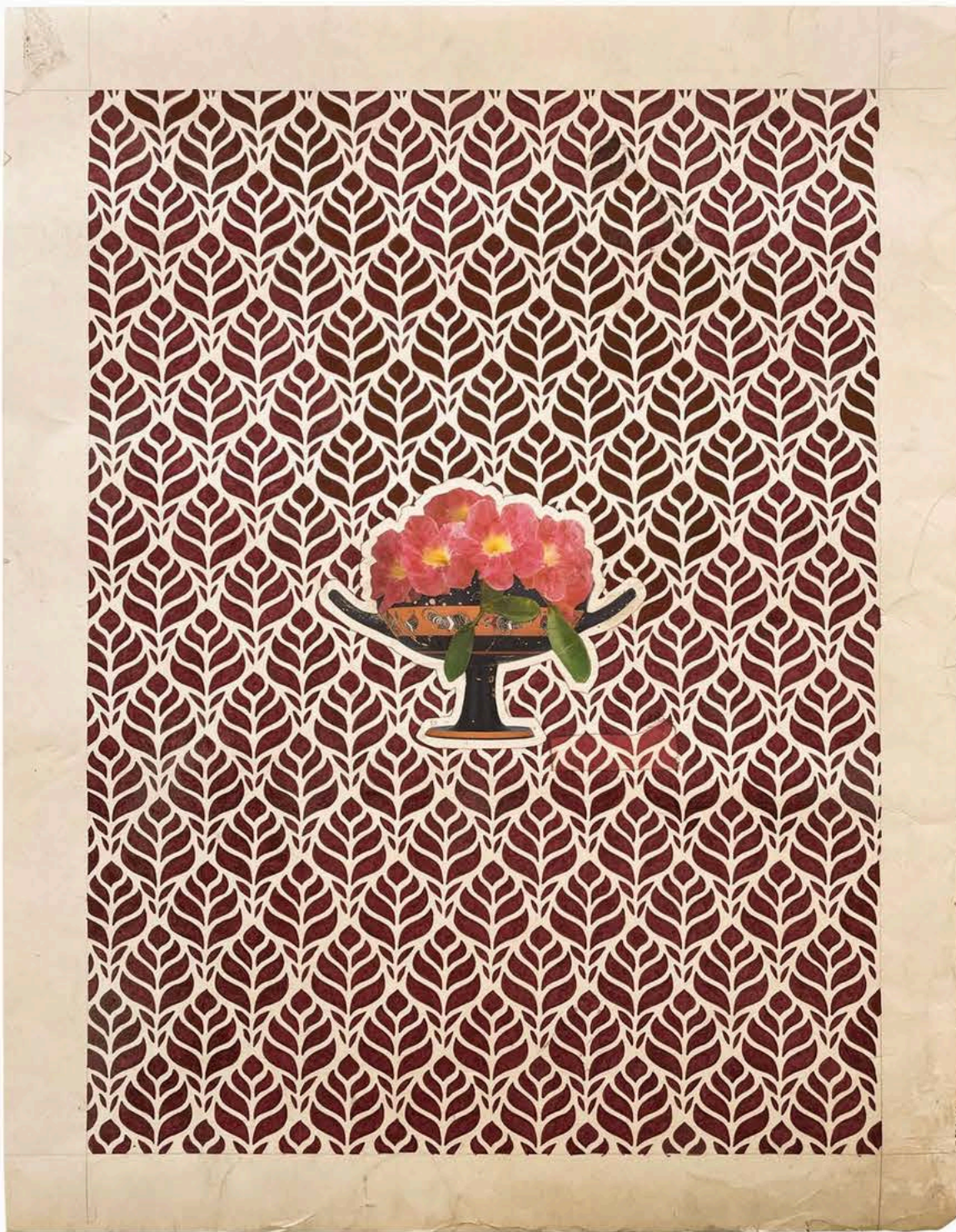
**CRAVEN:** I'm a believer that your surroundings do affect your practice and your career. Having grown up in the Midwest, I suppose I viewed going to New York as the ultimate challenge. I wanted to know everything about art and needed a crash course. I threw myself into it 100% and learned so much in a short period. It was a blur in retrospect, but I did develop my practice there, and it was where I figured out what I wanted to do in life. It was where I found the materials and inspiration to propel my work into the future. The success I had there also allowed me a bit of freedom, so when I felt like I needed another change in life, I moved West. I got a lot out of my time in New York, but eventually I realized I didn't necessarily need it to continue to grow as an artist. That kind of growth, for me, is dependent on always seeking out new challenges and life experiences—sometimes that also requires new surroundings.

**AMPERSAND:** What is a workday like for you in the studio? Your finished work often conveys a notion of effortless, but it occurs to me that executing any one piece likely requires a lot of mental exertion. Or periods of tedium. If so, are there strategies you employ to combat this? From the point of view of making, what is your measure of success on a given day? How much time do you allow for experimentation?

**CRAVEN:** I try to only go to the studio five days a week. Limit it to that. In the past, it was an everyday thing, but that wasn't good for my mental health. Now I'm much more aware of enjoying my time both in and outside of the studio. Making sure I have a variety of things I can work on in a given day is very helpful, since my mood often dictates productivity. You're right about the tedium of the work. It may seem silly to some, but the work is very laborious, both in its physical execution and the mental toll it takes staying hyper-focused for hours on end. Tosha has helped me realize how much my practice can take out of me. I put so much energy into the work—something I think people feel when looking at one of my pieces. But, as obvious as it might seem, I wasn't fully aware that all this energy is actually coming from me, that I'm exerting an extreme amount of physical and mental effort. This has been a somewhat new, but very important realization. Making sure I take the time to preserve enough energy to be a person outside the studio, and also find new ways to energize myself before I return. Both are key to my practice. As far as success and experimentation in the studio, I try not to put any expectations on myself. I just love to go in there and work. When I'm in the right headspace, I'll be productive and, by default, I'll come up with new ideas naturally.



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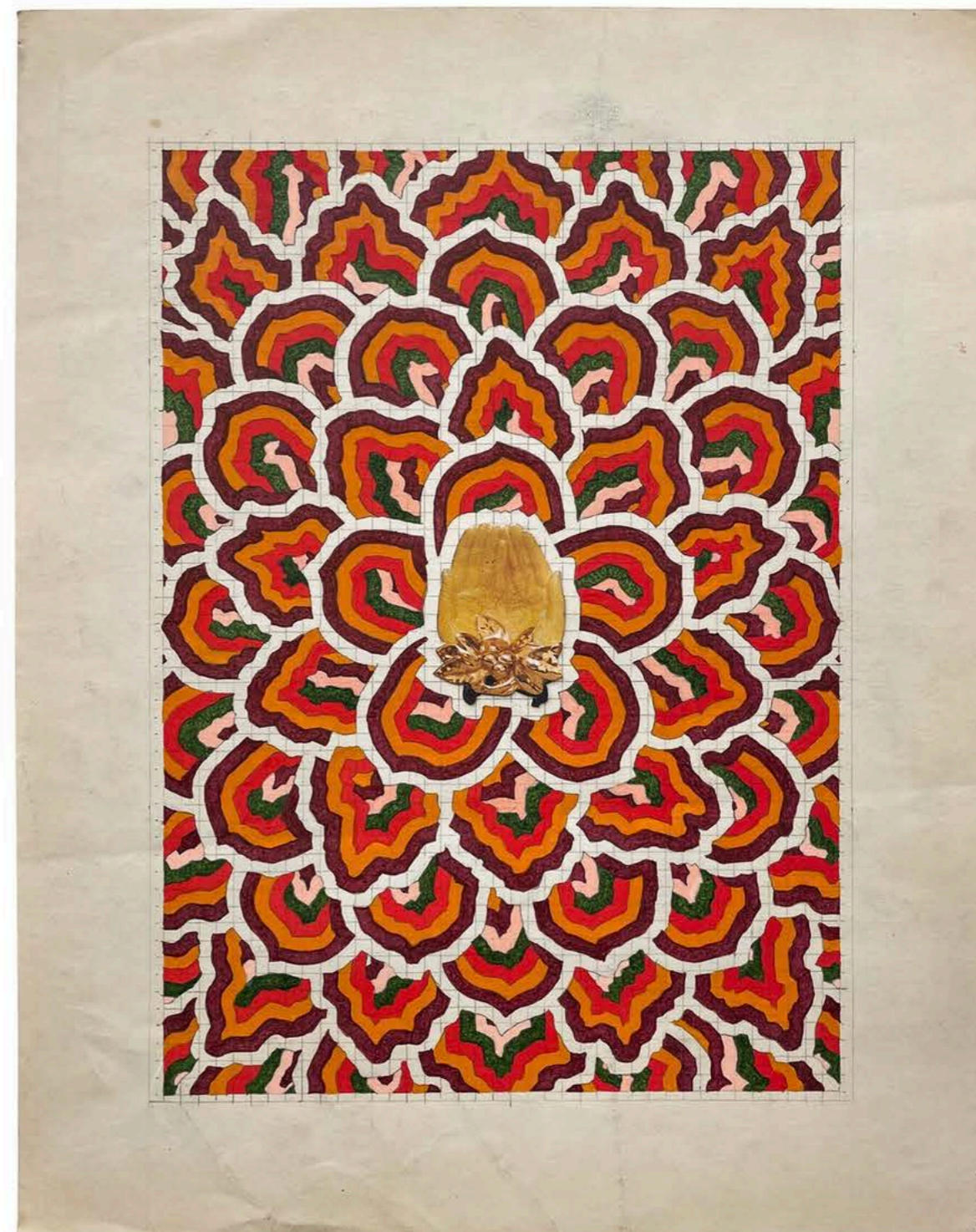
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**AMPERSAND:** In words, can you provide us a mental image of your studio? Not an overview of the entire space, but more the sensory details. It's in an urban environment, right? So I'm guessing there's a lot of environmental stimulation—distinct smells and noises that are unique to the neighborhood. Do you work in silence or is music often playing? Is there a sense of community around the space, or do you need isolation.? How do you go about keeping the space and your materials organized?

**CRAVEN:** When I first moved to the Bay, things were crazy and the only workspace I found didn't have windows. The pandemic was in full affect and those tough times weren't made any easier by trying to work in such a dreary space. But a year ago I moved into what I would consider a dream studio. It has four large windows, so the room is flooded with great light and fresh air everyday. I have two large work tables where I can spread out my materials, and there's a small sitting area with a chair, a rug, succulents and my record player. The space also has a side room for storage, so I can keep the workspace uncluttered, which helps me focus on the day's specific project. It's a very comforting and productive space to work in. Recently we moved to a new home and my studio is only a couple blocks away. This allows me to walk there, so it feels like when I was living and working in Brooklyn a decade ago. There are other artists in the building, but my space is private and gives me the isolation I need to focus. I usually work in silence for the first hour of a work day. It gives me a little time to get oriented, to look around and decide what needs my focus for the day. After that it really depends, since some work is best when I'm listening to music—it helps me find a groove. Somedays I want a little more stimulation, so I'll listen to a favorite podcast or put on a movie that I've seen in the background and kind of just absorb its sounds.

**AMPERSAND:** One last question about materials. It occurs to me that you've always worked within limitations. A specific type of found paper, a set of colors determined by the ink pens you primarily use, parameters within a grid, source imagery limited to what you find in discarded books. Even with these restrictions, however, your work always feels incredibly rich and dynamic. But, at the same time, there's so many other resources and making processes at your disposal. How is it that you stay focused on this one process? Perhaps it's somehow innate to your making sensibilities—almost like a form of discipline, something you've done for years now, right?

**CRAVEN:** It's always on my mind. On one hand I want to break out of specific ways of working when it feels too restrictive, but on the other I'm very proud of the aesthetic I've developed, and a lot of that is dependent on specific materials. In some ways I think about artists in other mediums that develop their own style. For example, a film director like John Carpenter has such a particular style. His filmography is connected by things like the scores he composes and by reusing a specific font for the opening credits of his films. I really appreciate that consistency and how it makes his work feel connected. As much as I am always trying to evolve, I like a slow evolution. I know this is what I am going to do as long as I'm alive, so I'm just letting the world guide me, trying to be grounded in my principles, but staying open to whatever comes next.



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