



Cohort Archive

Spring Cohort 2024



Cover Art
“It Isn’t Freedom (When You’re Filled With Rage)”
by Avesha Michael

Published August 30th, 2024

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INTRODUCTION

Awakenings offers survivors of sexual violence a trauma-informed art-making experience that encourages personal and communal healing. Awakenings cohorts allow our survivors to heal together in a safe, trauma-informed environment, while building a creative community.

Awakenings Spring Cohort 2024 included eight cohort members going through a healing arts curriculum together over the course of eight weeks. As the cohort finished, each member contributed to a group art installation in Awakenings Chicago Studio. This artwork was on exhibit May 2024 - August 2024. The *Cohort Archive* contains images from seven of the eight cohort member's installations, their reflections on the art they created and their cohort experience.

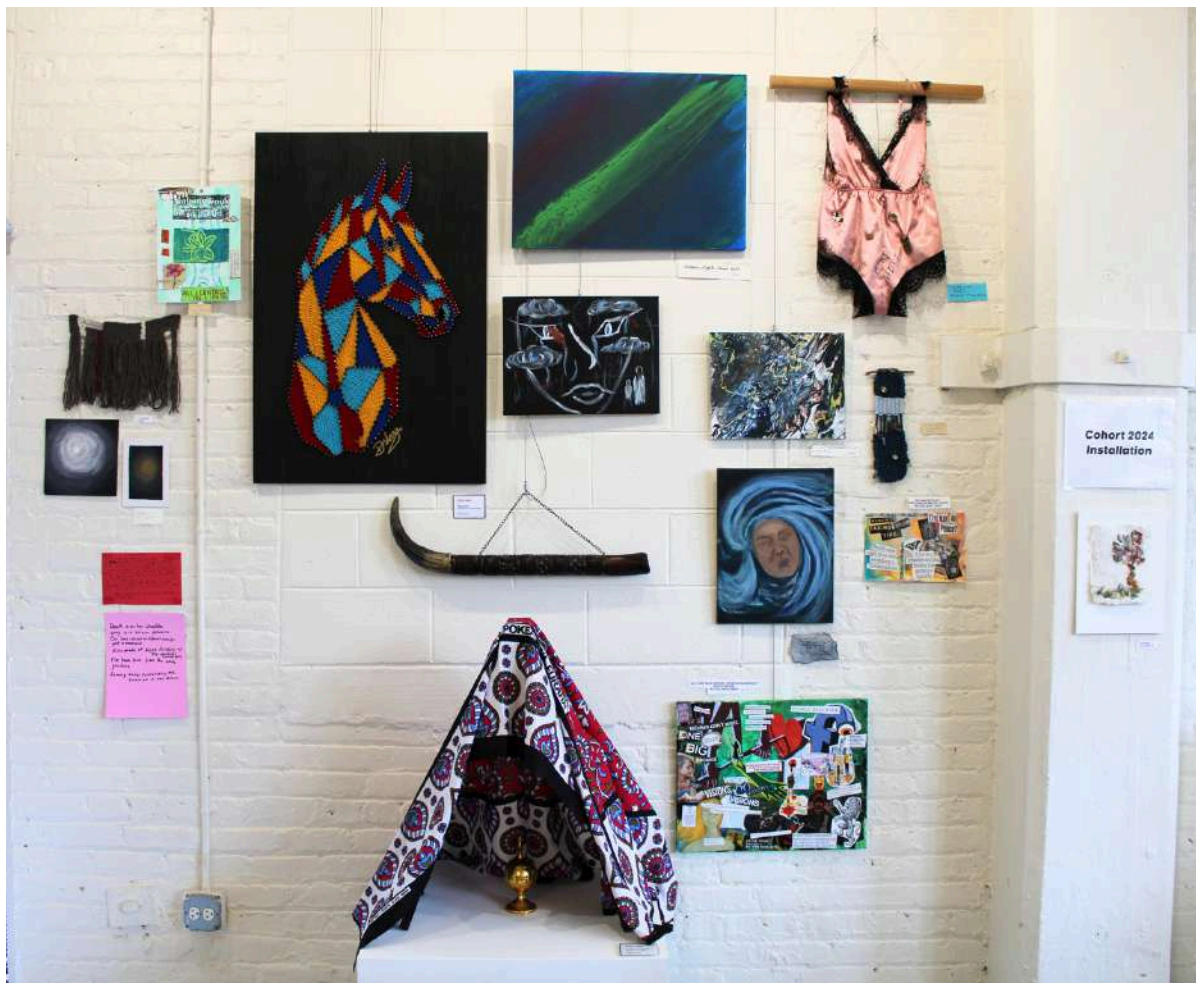
CONTENT WARNING

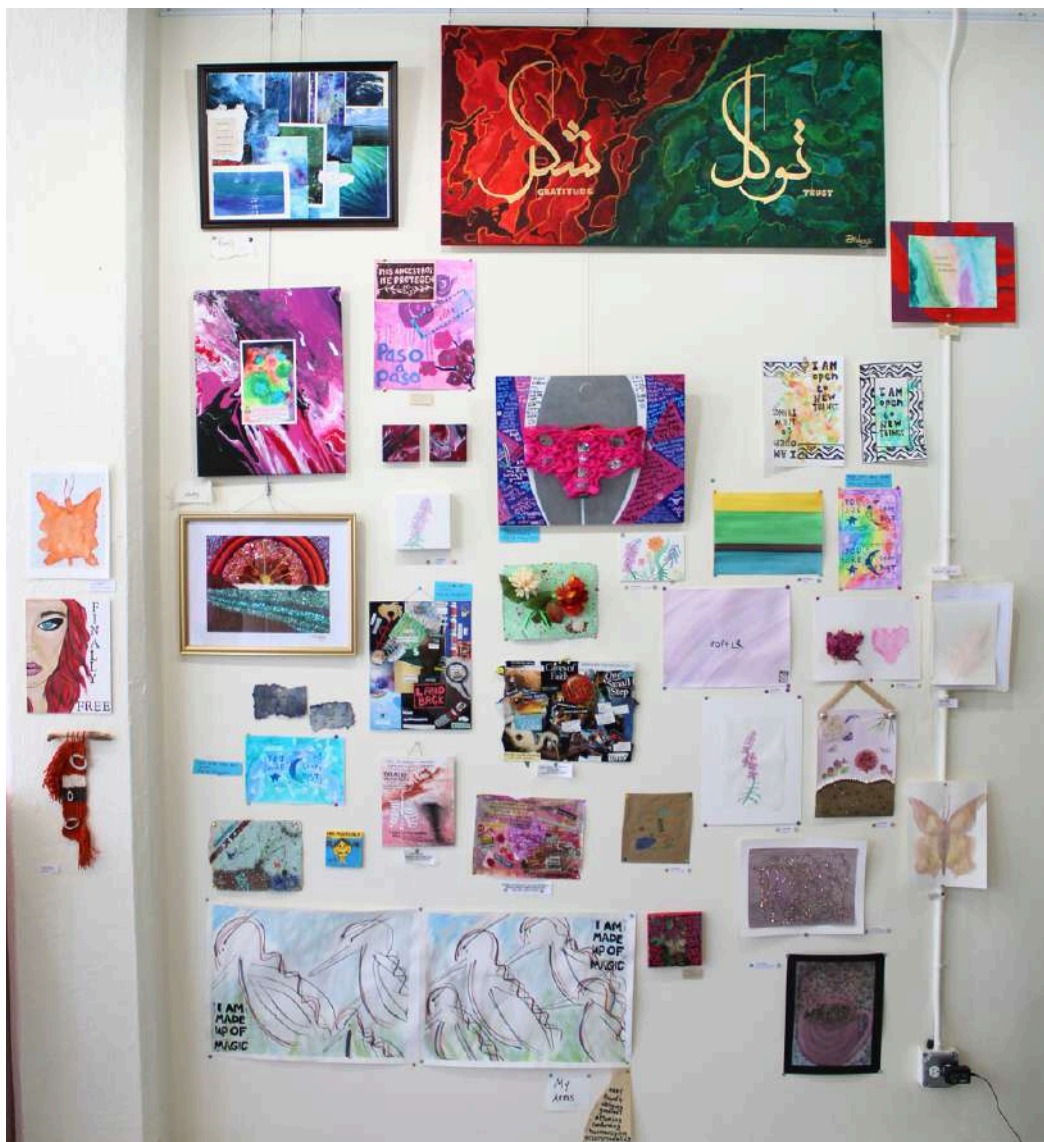
The following issue contains material including one or more of the following: rape, sexual assault, abuse, child abuse, gender-based violence, grooming, pedophilia, misogyny, pornography, addiction, homophobia, fatphobia.

The intention behind this content warning is to prepare a reader so they can choose to bravely engage with potentially activating material, even if this doesn't always feel comfortable. May it also serve as a reminder that a reader can pause and take a break from reading. The stories will be here, ready when the reader returns.



Cohort Installation





Inner Landscape

Avesha Michael
writing, mixed media

I am safer than I've ever been
In my entire life before
Safer than a baby in my mama's arms
Than a child hugging my father's thigh
Even more than freely floating
In a river in Northern California

I'm safer because I'm finding me
under the rubble of what I've lived
I'm uncovering what it means to be free
Free from the plethora of abuse
Of disembodied existing
Disassociated, numbed out living

That mirror the shame in me
Lies cloaked as truth
like a million paper cuts left undone
The pain seeps down three floors to the ground
And refurbishes who I've become, and still...

I'm safer now from years of torment and pain
So deep and dire I lived a nonstop silent scream
Until the air evaporated and I deflated into nothing
Before rising and facing the darkness
While forging and finding the light

I'm safer than ever before
Because I grasped on for dear life,
to save my own
explored every tapestry of my inner realm
After living an unbearable infinity
I gave the mic and pen to me

I've been carving out a softer home
One where I listen, with an open heart
A place where all thoughts are welcome and
Feelings are held with
A softness and witness like never before
Big feelings are honored and depths wholly felt
The stories untethered and rewritten myself

I'm freer than I've ever been
And holding this gently
Bring tears I fought hard for
Of release, of surrender, of a way out
To find my way inward
To my being, my ethereal core
Reminding myself, "you are safe inside"
"I won't hurt you, nor let you be hurt"

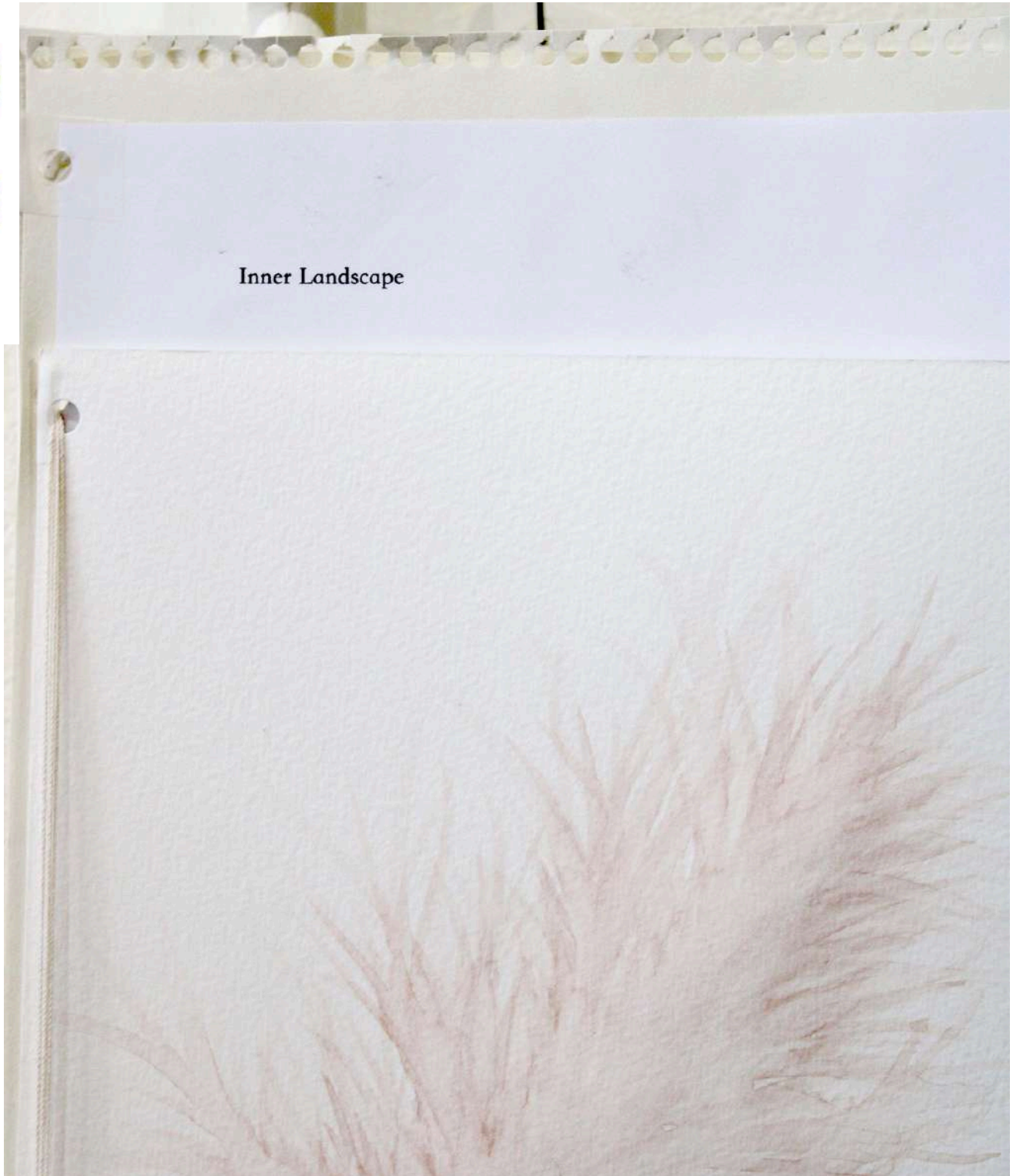
This is the freest I have ever been
because I tune in, not out
one hand on belly, one on chest
And like a radar of love
I tend to myself, like a soft dove
Of the warmest hue of taupe
Carrying a message straight to my heart
Softly saying "thank you for this moment"
"I feel so honored and loved"



Inner Landscape

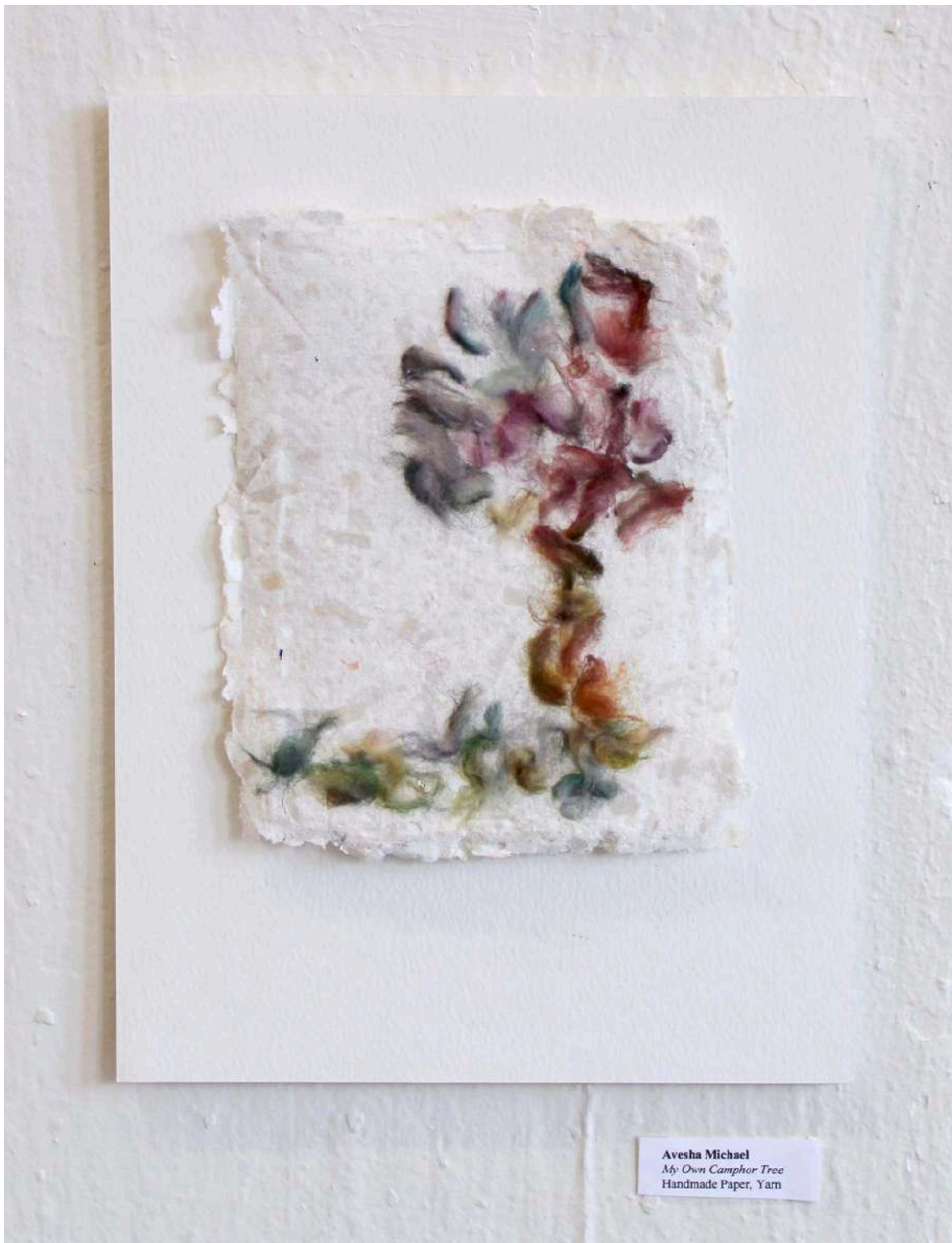
Avesha Michael
writing, mixed media

Inner Landscape



My Own Camphor Tree

Avesha Michael
handmade paper, yarn



This is hard

Avesha Michael
watercolor, block print



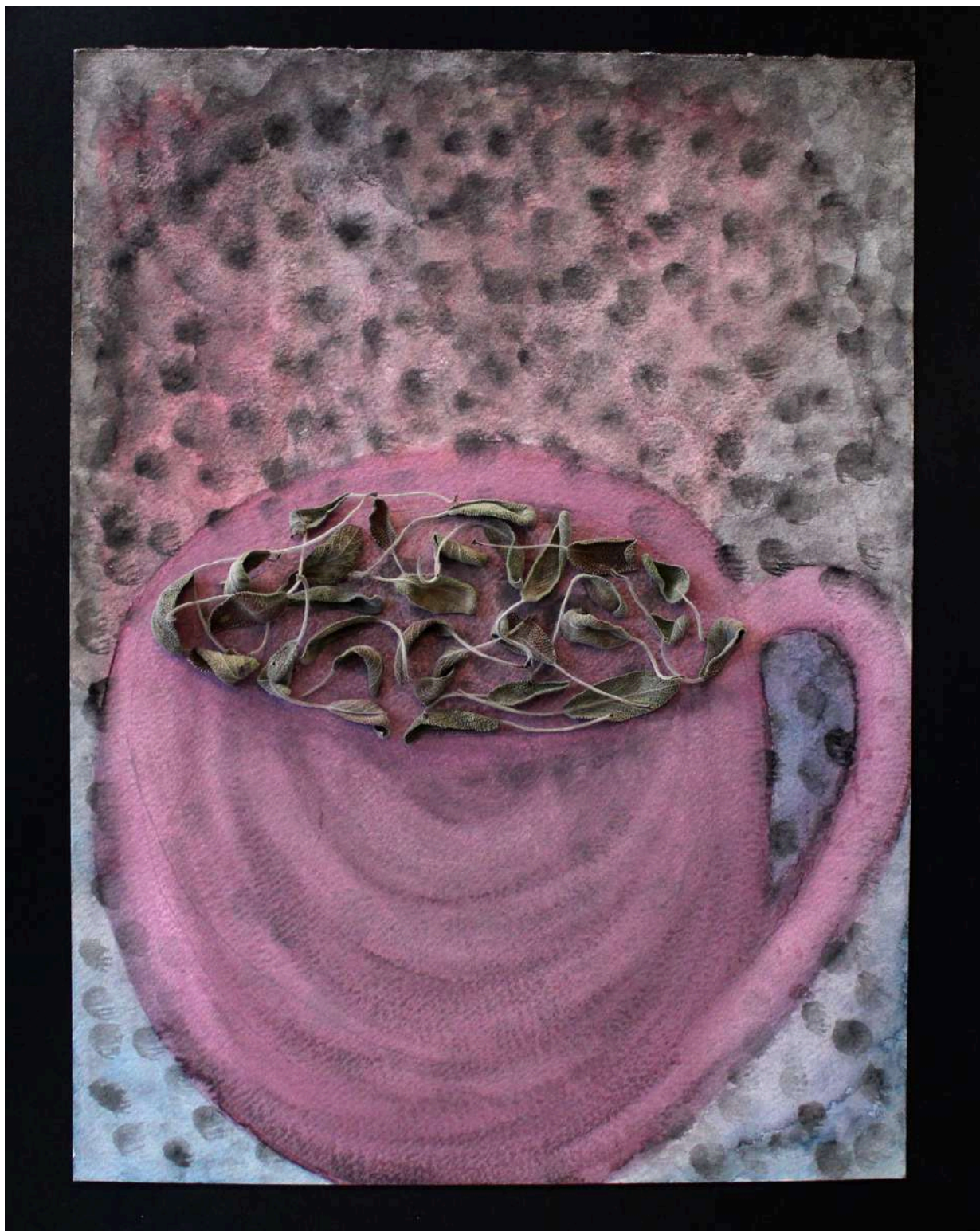
You Can't Change My Heart

Avesha Michael
mixed media, watercolor, acrylic



It Will Take More Than Sage

Avesha Michael
mixed media



Firewood No. 2

Avesha Michael
watercolor



It Isn't Freedom (When You're Filled With Rage)

Avesha Michael
watercolor



Severed At the Waist

Avesha Michael
watercolor



Say It Out Loud

Avesha Michael
weaving



Avesha Michael
Say It Out Loud
Weaving

As a working artist living with and healing from complex trauma, the Cohort was a profound experience for me. It was painful and freeing coming face to face with my coping skills, some that no longer serve me. I unearthed the depths of my perfectionism, my need to be good before I even learn and the constriction and limits this held me in.

The journey of this healing program allowed me to deeply feel the constraints of my need to be perfect and good in order to be valued and worthy of even existing. A subconscious survival mechanism that broke down as I surrendered to each new workshop, each new medium and each new moment that I witnessed in myself.

The impacts of being witness to myself, my trauma, my grief and pain, while practicing compassion and patience for the places that still hurt deeply was revolutionary. I found every moment a welcoming to the next, rather than every moment about the end.

I started out creating for product, not wanting to start for fear of not being good enough for my own standards, which has kept me so limited in my freedom and expression. By the end of the Cohort, I found myself not being attached to outcome, but rather engrossed in the moment of creation. The entire expanse of expression, being fully present with myself and discovering new depths of myself was the craft. I learned in an experiential way, how every aspect of embodied creation is living art.

Through the program and integrating it into my daily life, moment to moment, in my ceramics, my storytelling, my writing ... I realized how I experience the world is art. Simply being present with my self, my feelings, my embodied lived experience transforms and informs my expression. From this place, I allowed my senses and my inner voice to guide me... and found tremendous healing along the way.

I experienced how freeing and expansive creating can be... how profoundly art heals.

Avesha Michael



Feelings (center)

Avesha Michael
weaving

EMPTY SPACE (lower left)

L
acrylic paint

The moon (lower right)

Julia Wilson
acrylic paint



Landscape of a Process is a joint installation of “FEELINGS” by Avesha, “The moon” by Julia, and “EMPTY SPACE” by L. At first, these artworks came together because we found familiarity in the color, tone, and feeling of the works we created, despite each piece being created apart from one another. We sought to install these pieces together as a means for us to further grow a connection with each other.

Landscape of a Process represents the journey of going through an embodied process of navigating emotions. For Avesha, the process of weaving held her during a painful time. The array of feelings that emerged while creating this piece were woven into and nurtured her embodied experience towards healing. For Julia, “The moon” is the result of time spent learning to accept the reality of the abuse experienced as something that “just is,” without self judgement or blame. For L, “EMPTY SPACE” is a representation of what it means to move about in the world with feelings of dissociation, protecting themselves with emptiness in response to overwhelm. We regard our art as a landscape, one as a process that we hold together.

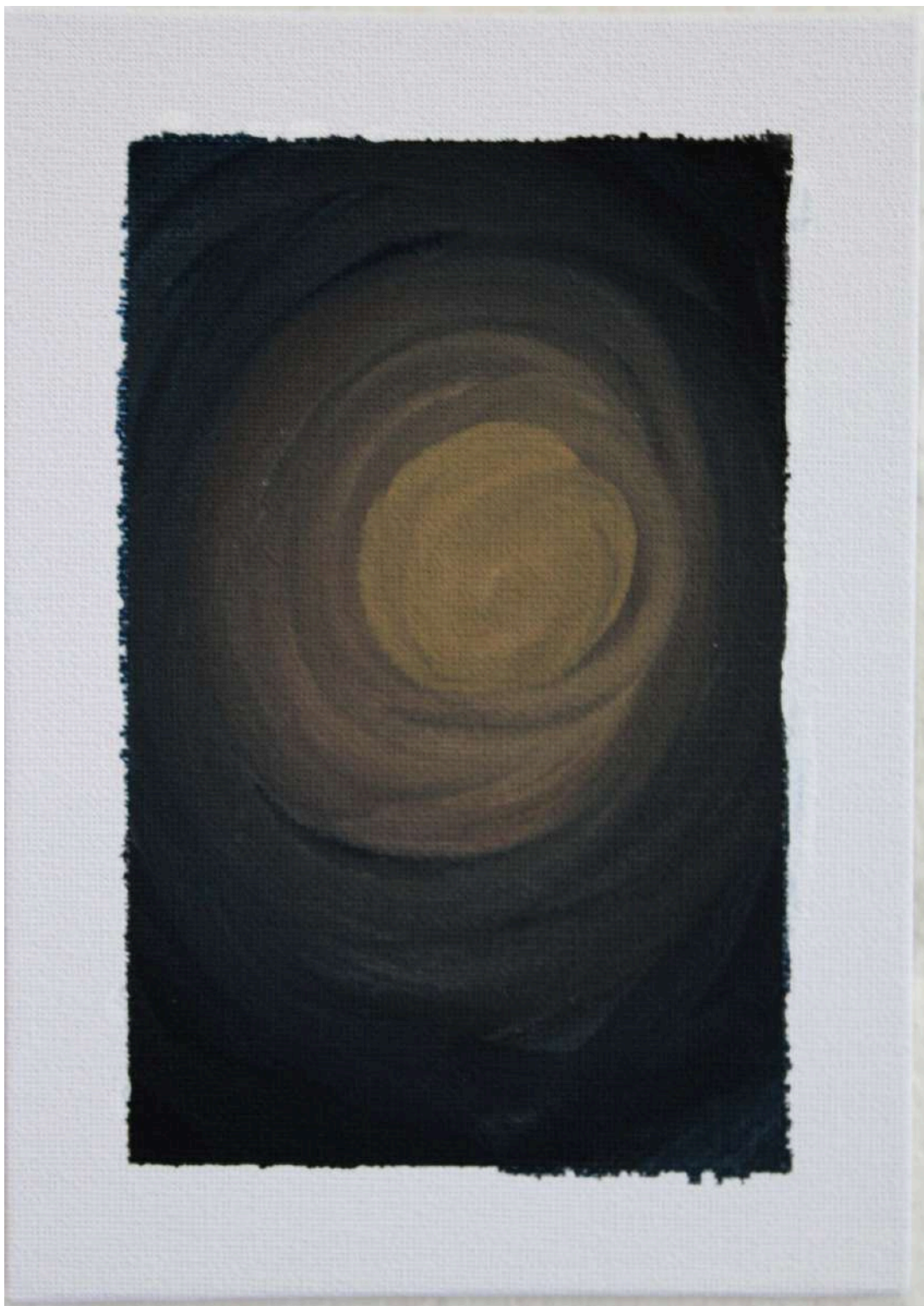
Avesha Michael

L

Julia Wilson

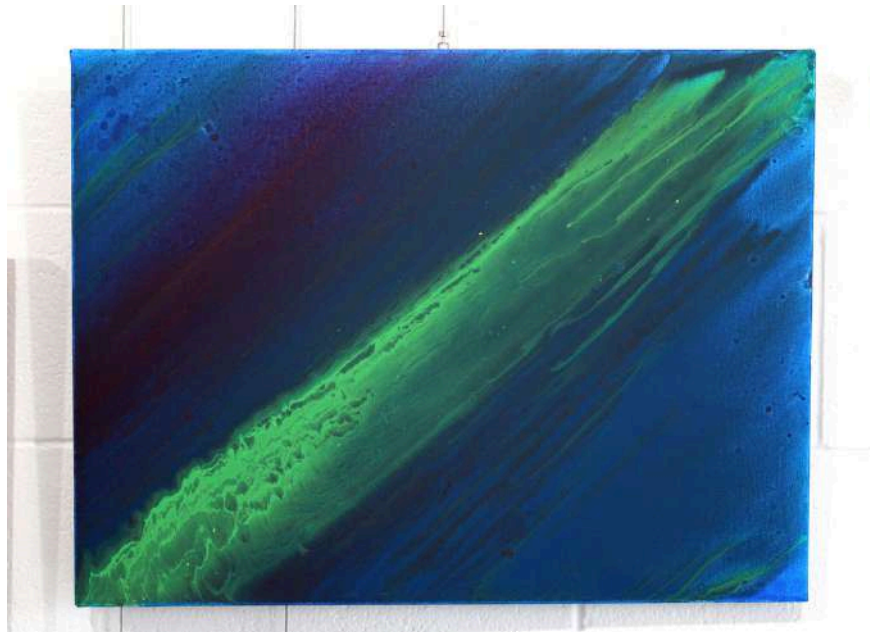
The moon

Julia Wilson
acrylic on canvas



Northern Lights, Illinois 2024

Julia Wilson
acrylic on canvas



Renewal, the koi pond at the Garden of the Phoenix

Julia Wilson
acrylic on canvas

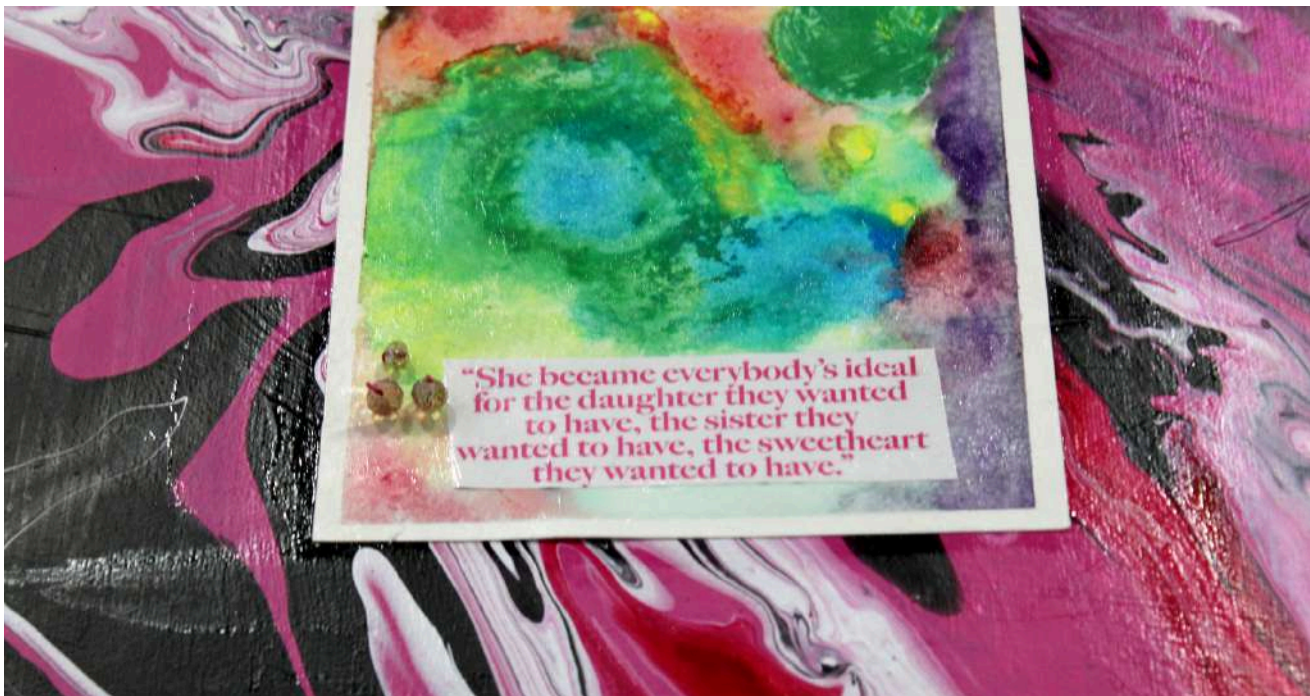


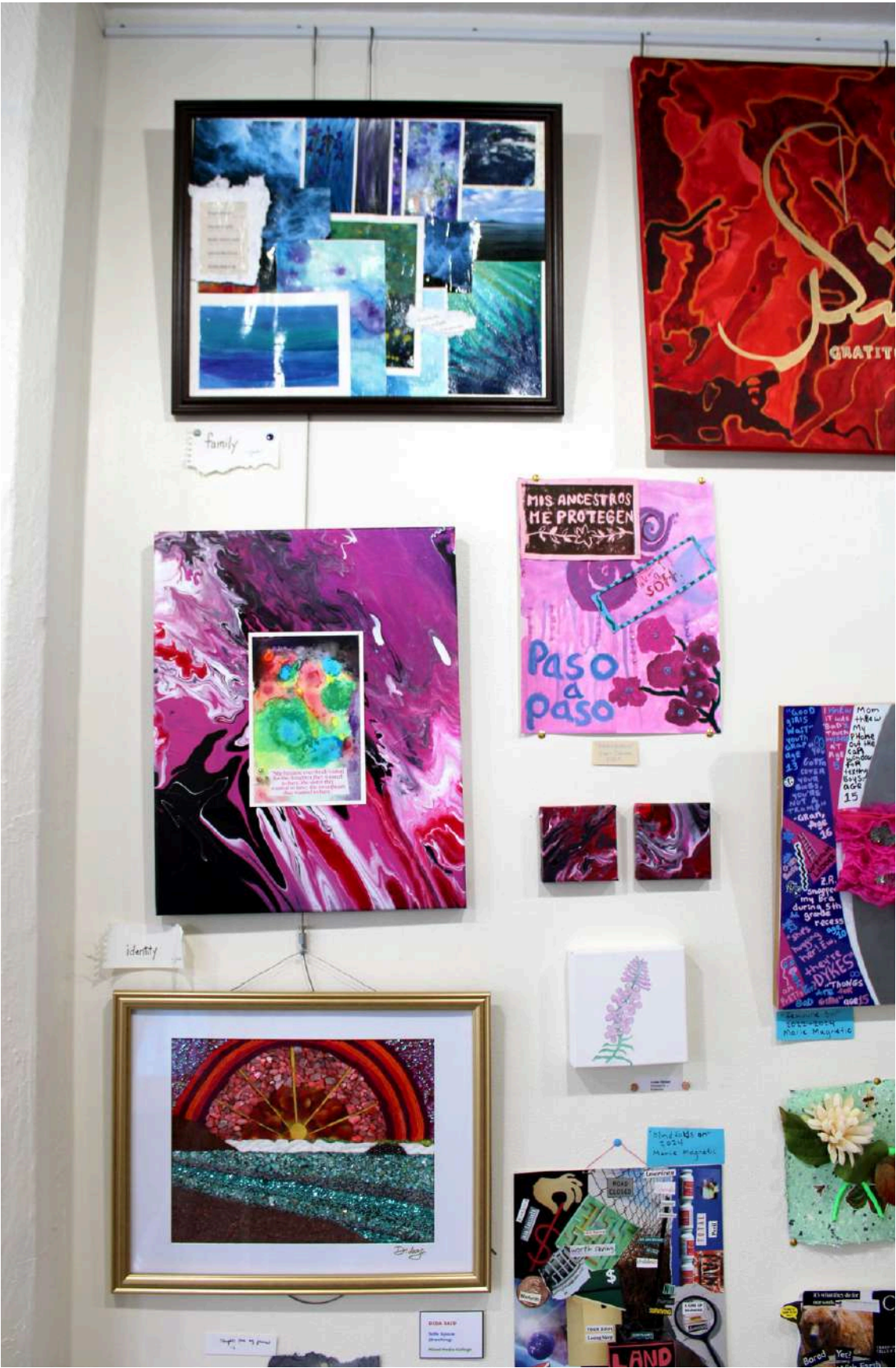
family (left)

Julia Wilson
collage

identity (right)

Julia Wilson
mixed media





Little Miss Know it All

Julia Wilson

acrylic paint, acrylic marker



My Arms

Julia Wilson

ink on paper



growing free

Julia Wilson
block print, acrylic



growing free

Julia Wilson
block print, acrylic



Nature is a repeating theme for my art. It informs my color choices and motifs to make something wild and potentially volatile into a communication of experiences and feelings. Just as rain becomes snow at the top of a mountain, and then becomes a stream in the valley, my feelings transmutate into art, then into words and thoughts that I can share.

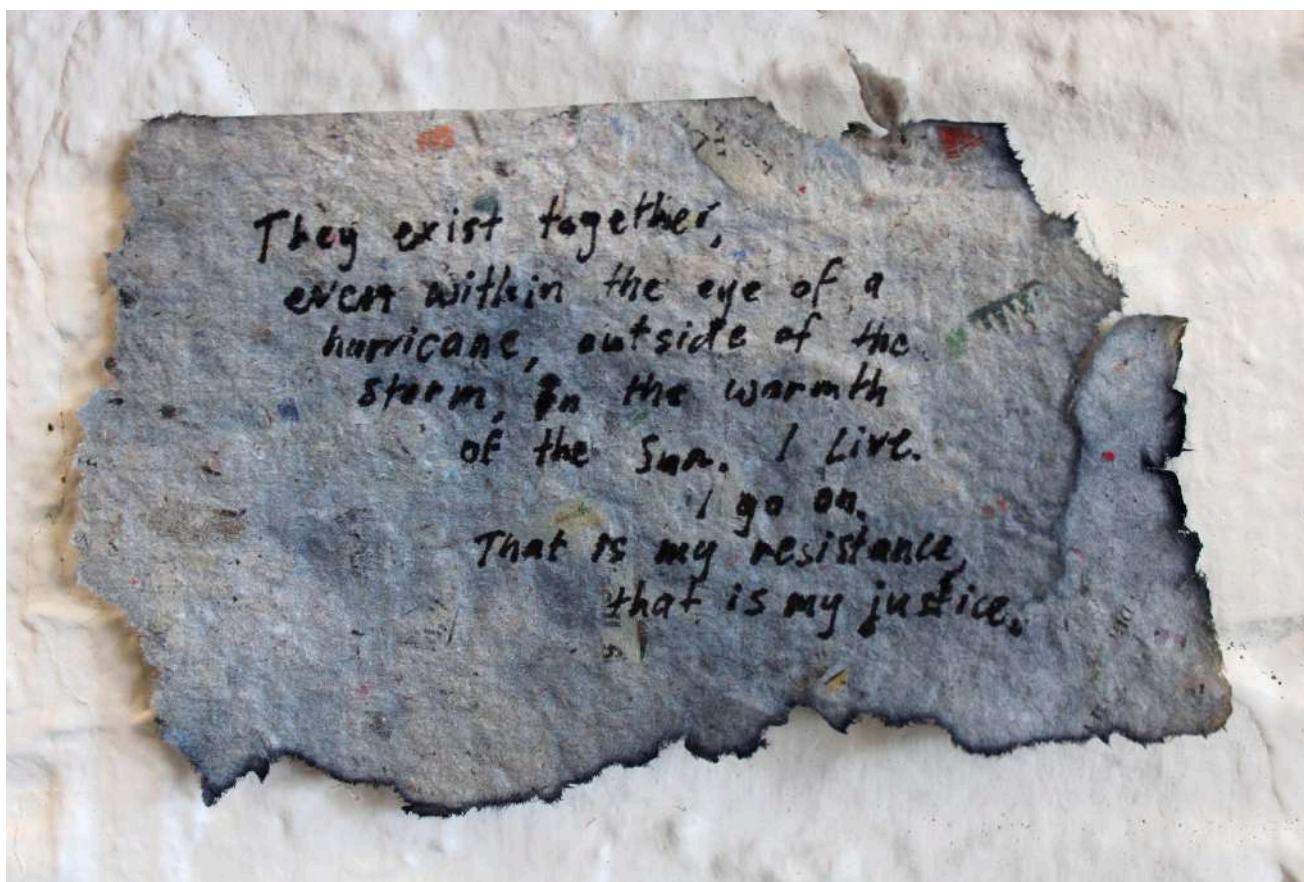
Julia Wilson



I AM THE EYE OF THE HURRICANE

L
acrylic on canvas





“They exist together, even within the eye of a hurricane, outside of the storm, in the warmth of the seas. I live. I go on. That is my resistance, that is my justice.”

My piece, “I AM THE EYE OF THE HURRICANE”, encompasses the meaning behind the artwork I created during my time with Awakenings. It represents my wide spectrum of emotions and thoughts in dealing with the aftermath of my trauma, swirling into moments of change, chaos, and calm. I search through my art to validate who I am within the weariness, emptiness, unpredictability, curiosity, and joy of my existence. I welcome and embrace this as part of who I am.

L

Thoughts from my journal

L

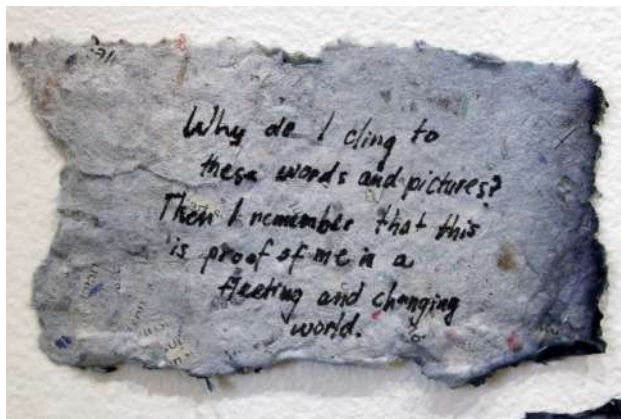
ink on handmade paper



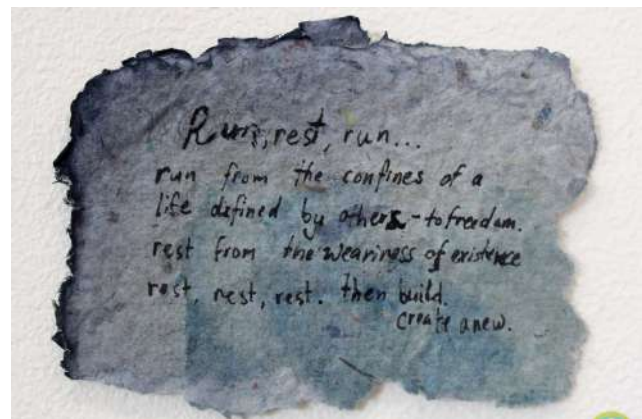
"Same roots, different tree."



"Searching for another STAR."



"Why do I cling to these words and pictures?
Then I remember that this is proof of me in a fleeting
and changing world."



"Run, rest, run... run from the confines of a life defined
by others - to freedom. rest from the weariness of
existence rest, rest, rest. then build. create anew."

Wading through water

L
collage



Woven through change

L
weaving



I AM OPEN TO NEW THINGS

L

block print



BEFORE

I grew up never learning how to be vulnerable. It was a state of being that I shied away from. After experiencing trauma, vulnerability became more visceral and lonely. What I chose to disclose with others came from behind invisible brick walls that I cemented around myself. In dealing with the impact of trauma, I only allowed vulnerability to emerge quietly within myself and fade away in my solitude.

IN PROGRESS

Art-making and healing from trauma became intertwined throughout my journey over the last five years. I create art within and through my vulnerability. I have the luxury of approaching art with my full self; I have nothing to hide. Sometimes my art is an escape out of an inner world of turmoil. Rather than hold turmoil, isolation, and fear within my body, art shows me how to find ways to validate these emotions as powerful storytellers of my truth.

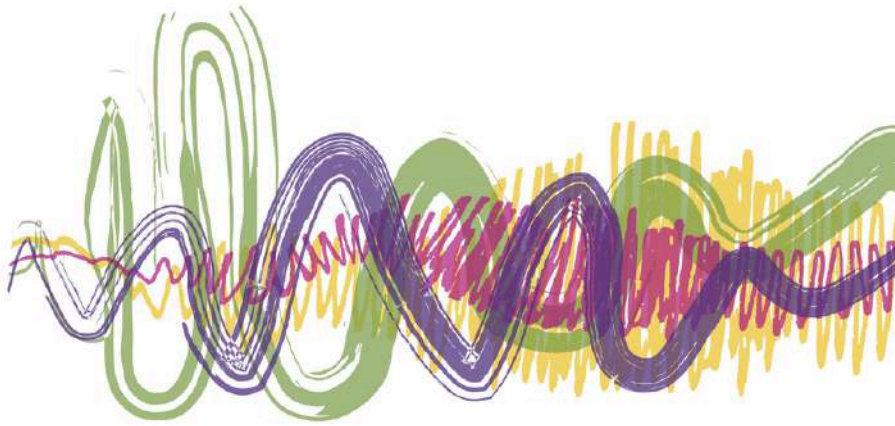
TRANSFORMATION

Before my experience with Awakenings, I avoided sharing the meaning of my art with others. I felt content creating alongside the cohort members during our art workshops. I was anxious about putting my art on the walls, much less having people look at this art during the Art Walkthrough. To show my art publicly was powerful and scary.

During the walkthrough, when faced with the choice of what to share, and whether I would say anything at all, I thought: *I don't like being vulnerable, but I'm gonna try it.* Never had I come up to a crowd so unprepared. And what resulted was a moment where I, for the first time, truly and openly showed up in a way that represented who I am as a survivor. This is significant to me because I put this part of myself into art and hid it from most people over the last 5 years. I don't want to hide this self anymore, at least not in the way that I have been doing. I hope to search for what this means for me as a survivor and an artist in the years to come.

L

SPRING COHORT 2024



blindfolds on

Marie Magnetic collage



bite me

Marie Magnetic
mixed media soft sculpture



bite me

Marie Magnetic
mixed media soft sculpture



"bite me"
2022
Marie M

feminine sin

Marie Magnetic
mixed media



you are star dust

Marie Magnetic
block print



My art is experimental and inspired by my life experiences. When making art, I aim to make sense of the world around me while highlighting social issues. My work examines neurodivergence, queer identity, and my Irish, Blackfeet, and Jewish heritage, while processing the ways society makes me feel othered.

Within my cohort experience, I was able to try and learn new things while receiving support and affirmation in a gentle, trauma-informed space. The art I made during the cohort allowed me to process my feelings in a creative space with empathy. Printmaking was especially fun since there is a lot you can do with that medium, and I wanted more instruction.

I found the final installation to be beautifully powerful. Participating in the group made me feel like I was part of a community and had somewhere to belong. I have grown as an artist and a person from my cohort experience, as I was influenced by each workshop, teaching artists, staff members, and fellow cohort artists.

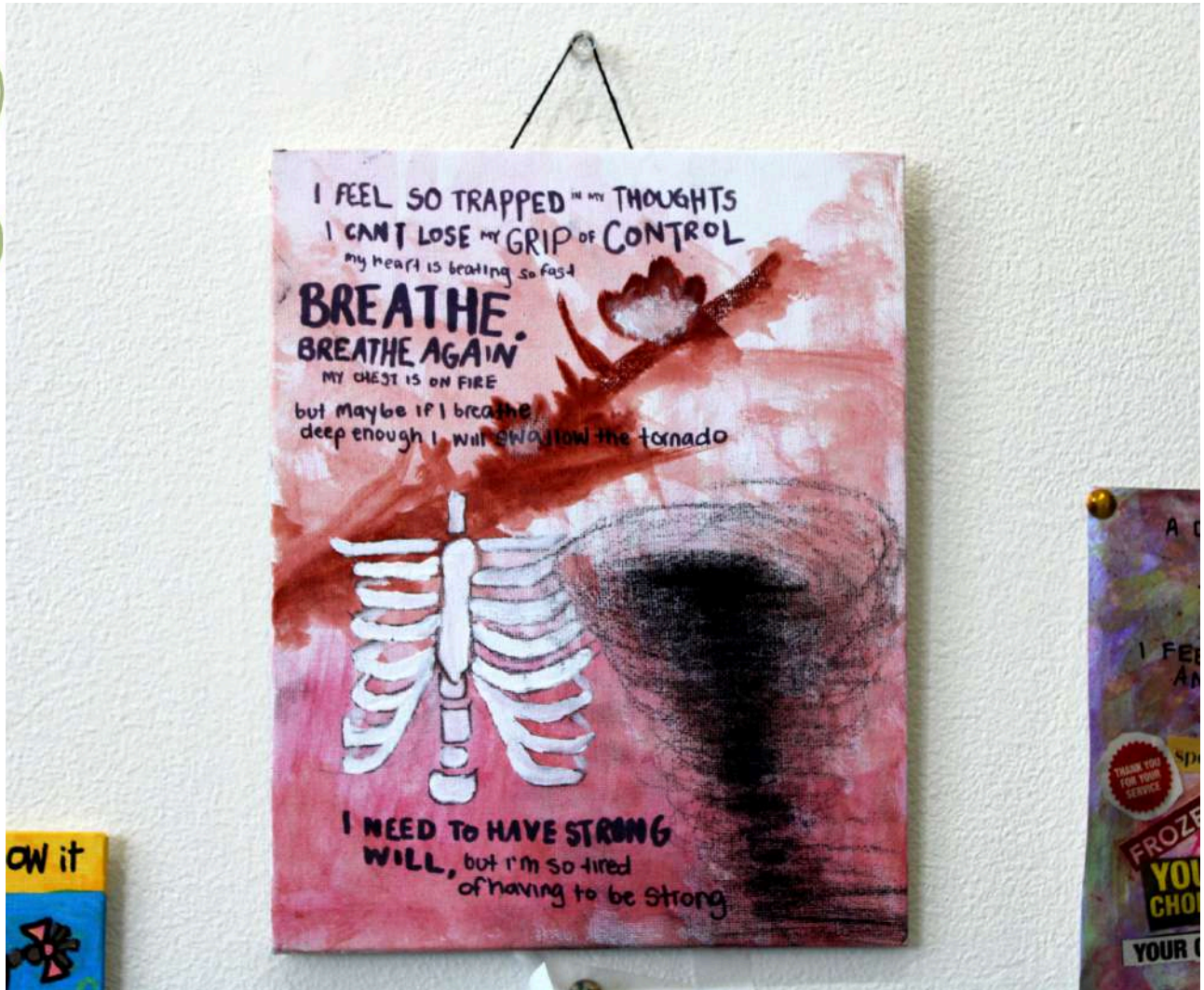
The work I have showcased in the cohort relates to self-love, processing shame and guilt, and the power of fourth-wave feminism. I chose these specific pieces to include because they are meaningful to me, and I hope others who come to this space can also find meaning in them. I am grateful for my experiences in the cohort and thankful for this supportive space that allows people to show up exactly as they are and be welcomed and loved.

Marie Magnetic



Breathe

Rachel Macciaro
watercolor and Ink



Rachel Macciaro

mixed media watercolor



Rachel Macciaro

mixed media watercolor



Rachel MacCiario
mixed media



Rachel Macciaro
mixed media



SPRING COHORT 2024



Groomed

Rachel Macciario
mixed media

SPRING COHORT 2024



An expression I employ in my work reads, “Art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed.” Each of my pieces exposes shadows of unspoken truths—the shame and embarrassment my courage has wrestled with, speaking out in a forced silence. I believe art is a powerful tool for self-reflection and collective liberation. The first step to solving any problem is recognizing there is one; however, what if everyone is too busy distracting themselves—hustling for basic needs or corporate greed—to stop and heed where the bleed is in need? In my body of work, I tackle themes of power, grief, taboos, and the repressed parts of oneself, inviting the exiled parts of myself back into the discussion. Who would I be? What would I have to say or offer to others if I were not trying to be likable or easily digestible? My work conveys a dance of balancing hope and sorrow, showing that I can hold space for both the dark and the light within me. Together, they can coexist, and in that space of existence comes an emotional alchemy of self-discovery.

In my piece entitled “Groomed,” I discuss my experience of being sexually groomed by men who abused their positions of power over me during my developmental years. I shed light on the idea that we live in a society built on and sustained by the blood of minorities, a society that prioritizes protecting the interests of pedophilic corporate elites. It normalizes the sale and overproduction of sex, lust, and insatiable desire—an urge that can never be fully satisfied. It poses the question: In a consumer-driven society, when is it enough?

Growing up, I never considered my dad to be an addict; he didn’t drink or do hard drugs like the “bad” dads I saw on television. It wasn’t until I got older that I began to understand that addiction can take many forms, including harmful activities or substances that aren’t always recognized as such. This realization came to me when I was six years old, seeing my dad consume insurmountable amounts of porn at the dinner table. It happened again at ten years old when I found photos of my classmates on his computer. This neglect planted deep seeds of anger and betrayal within me, emotions that I didn’t know how to navigate or communicate as a child. I struggled with expressing my anger as a woman and feeling safe to do so. Detachment through observation has been my greatest tool in moving through what society deems as negative emotions—to reach embodiment and understand the greater vision that my emotions are trying to communicate to me. Kasia Urbaniak reminds us that our anger is a middle phase that reveals what we deeply care about. She talks about the alchemical aspect of anger, where we stop seeing what we are fighting against and start seeing what we are fighting for. We reach a place where the bigger vision is not only healing the victims of sexual violence but also transforming the system that fuels it.

Rachel Macciaro

Take a peek inside. (Do it)

Saori Darlene
mixed media





Ambivalence

Saori Darlene
mixed media



Textured Feelings

Saori Darlene
weaving



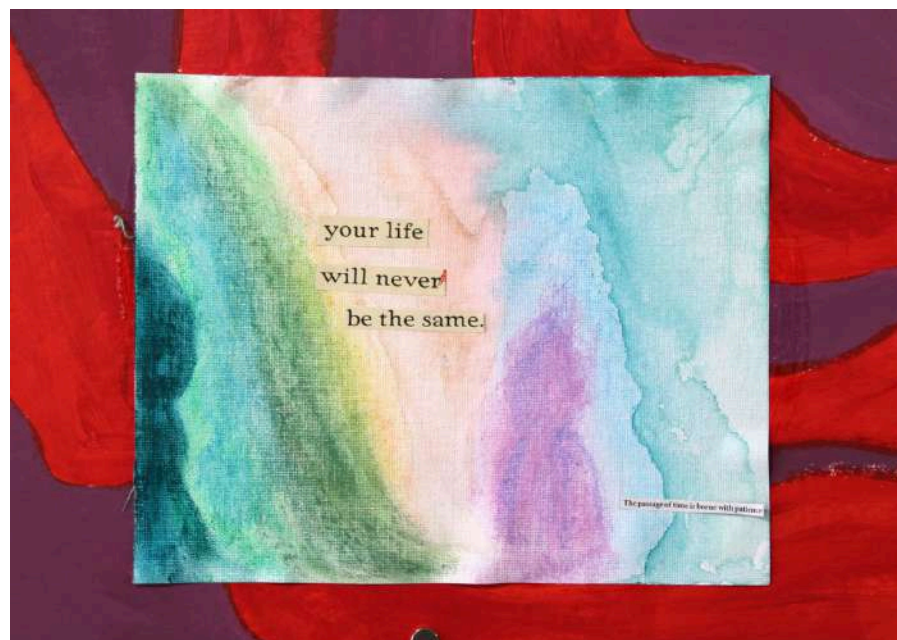
Raindrops

Saori Darlene
mixed media



Espiritus

Saori Darlene
mixed media



Strength

Saori Darlene
mixed media



I am not alone

Saori Darlene
weaving



Every day I do my best to live authentically, with intention, and care for myself and those I interact with. Throughout my experience at Awakenings, I prioritized that framework when creating art and conceptualizing the installation. With each art piece, I aim to share a part of my life – particularly, the emotions of grief, sadness, and ultimately, healing from violent trauma. I poured myself into these pieces to reclaim my power while processing through mixed media, allowing the different mediums to inform and reflect my emotional state.

Each workshop, and the facilitators, allowed me to expand my creative skills. I gave myself the flexibility and space to view these workshops as tools to explore mediums that best aligned with my emotions and thoughts at that time. The workshops helped me approach my art process with vulnerability and acceptance of imperfection. Using this framework, I structured non-workshop time to create a visual journey where I processed grief, anger, and fear.

When I first started this cohort, I was afraid of feeling raw and exposed – scared that, like in previous experiences, others would label my emotions and opinions as extreme. I felt myself recovering my voice and gaining control of my narrative; I permitted myself to share only what I wanted. Yet, as I learned more about my peers and felt more comfortable in the space, I found myself sharing more than I expected.

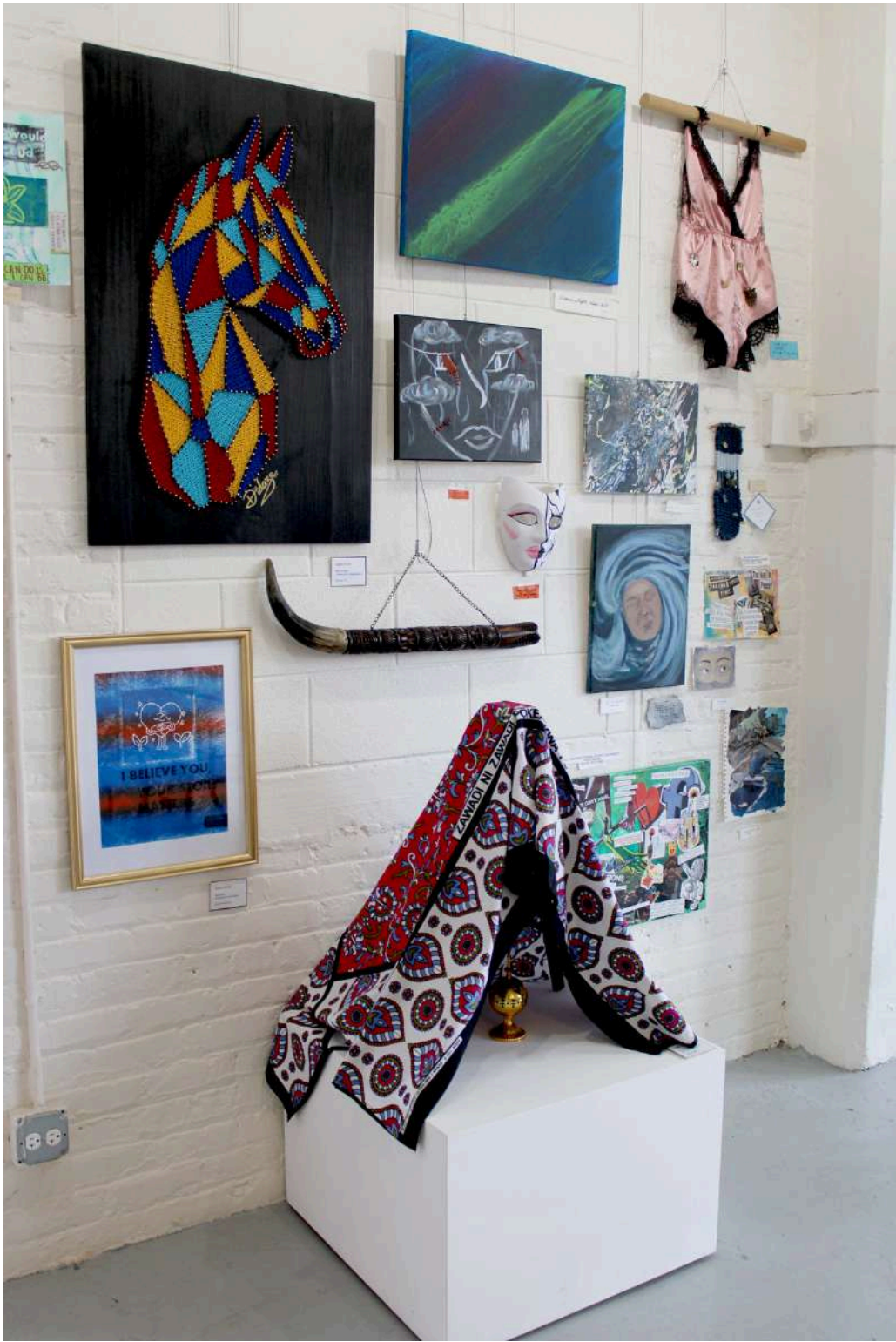
Ultimately, creating these pieces empowered me to share unspoken truths deep within me.

Saori Darlene





SPRING COHORT 2024



A Woman's Place (Swahili Voices)

Dida
mixed media





Blessings (Cheers to Friendships)

Dida
string art



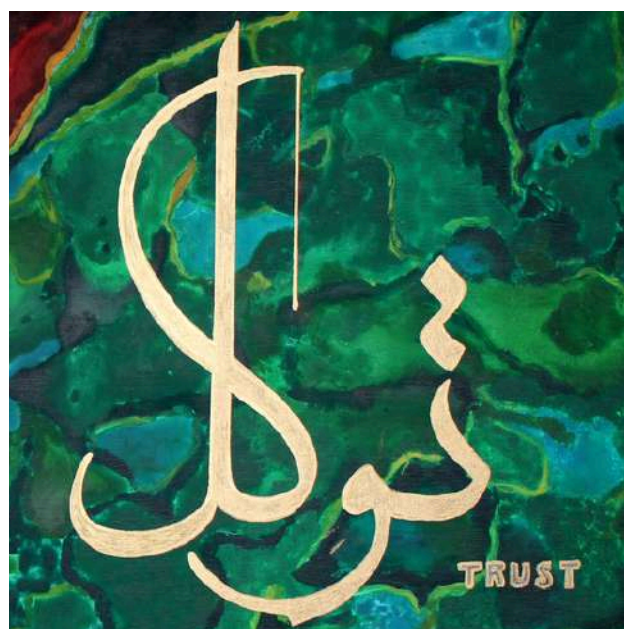
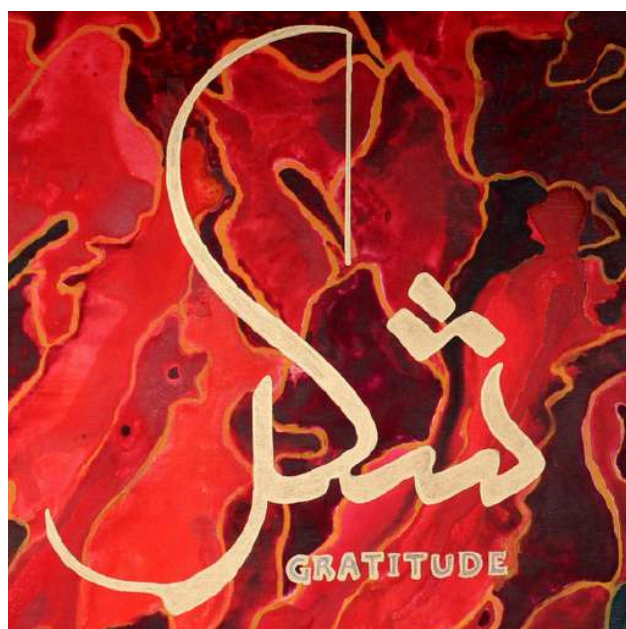
Manifesting

Dida

watercolor on canvas



SPRING COHORT 2024



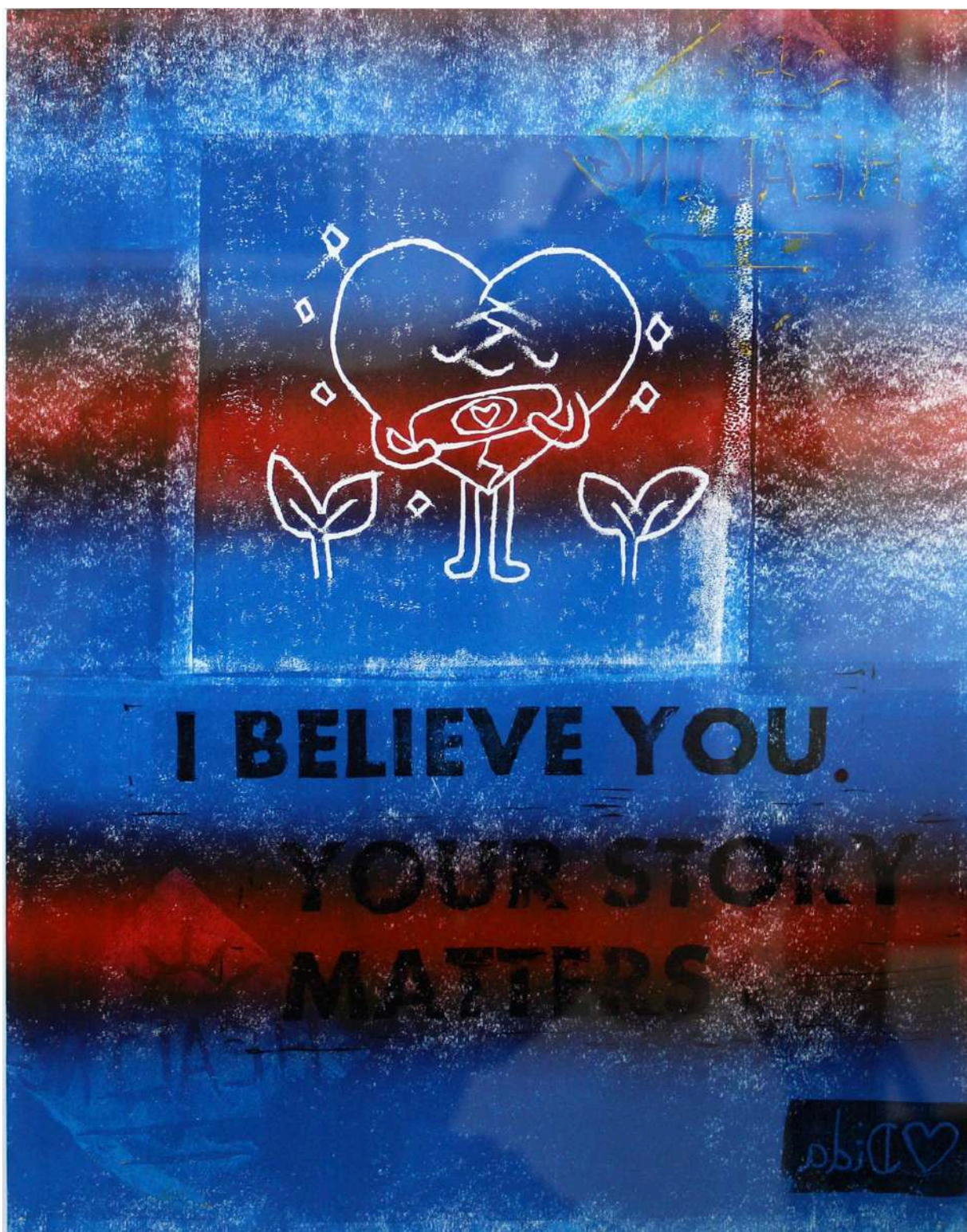
Growth (Love from Within)

Dida
foliage



Healing (Voices of Strength)

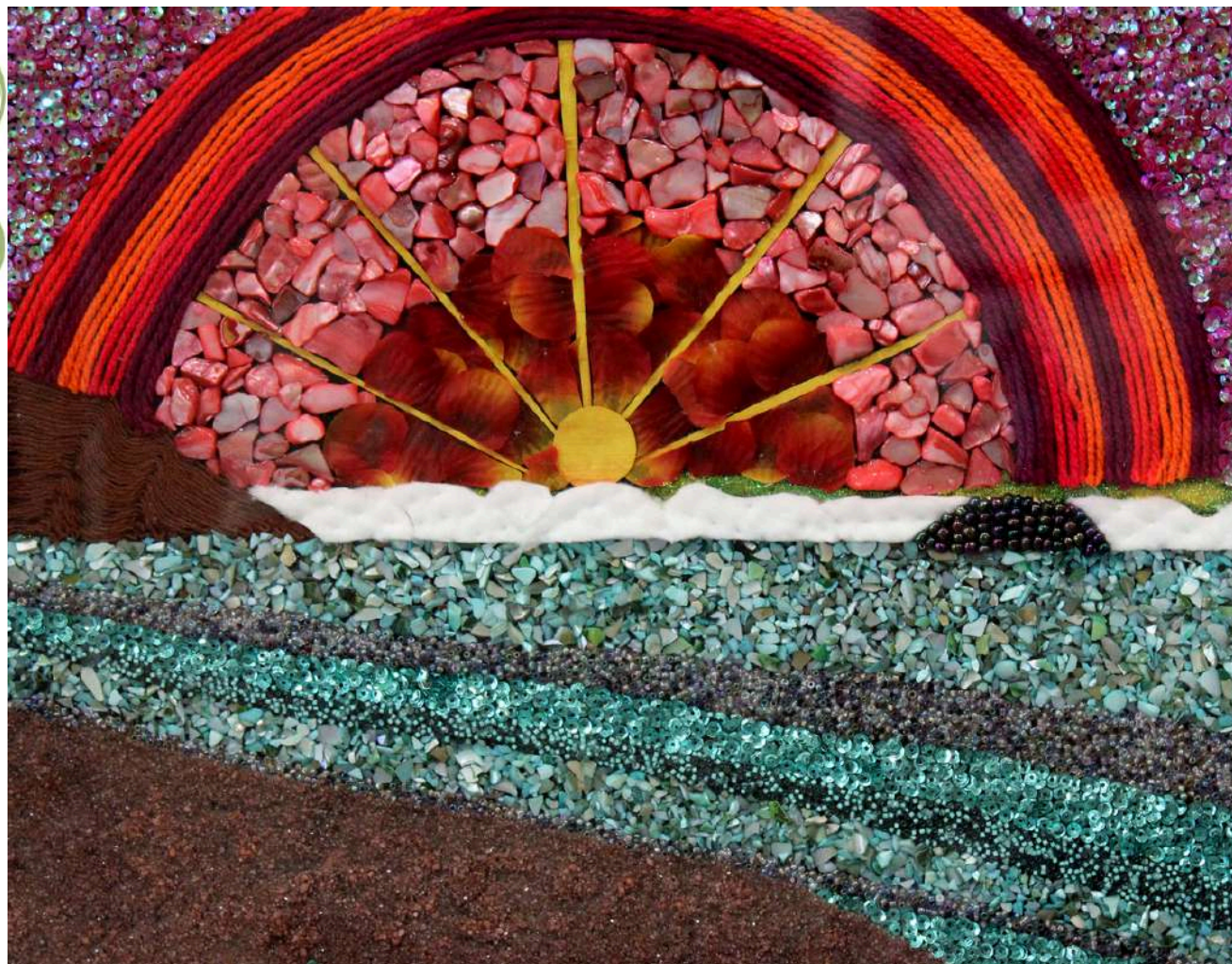
Dida
print medium



Safe Space (Breathing)

Dida

mixed media collage



When I joined the Awakening Spring Cohort 2024, all I remember was feeling overwhelmed and frustrated towards my life. Everything felt chaotic and coming into the studio felt like a huge chore or obligation. I was exhausted from looking for jobs, apartments and endless hospital visits.

However, I kept telling myself, “Maji ukiyavulia nguo, huna budi kuyaoga”“ A Swahili proverb my grandma loved to use against me whenever I would make declarations that I no longer wanted to go back to boarding school. The proverb translates to "If you have undressed for the water, you must bathe". Meaning that once you've committed to something, you must see it through. As absurd as that sounds, I used this proverb as my will power to keep attending the Cohort meetings week after week despite how down or stressed out I felt.

Going back to those initial feelings, as time passed by, my outlook on life significantly shaped my art. Since I chose to bathe in “ that water”, I started realizing that despite my life seemingly going to shambles, I predominantly carried hope within me. My turning point was when I knew I wanted to write the words “ Tawakal- Trust” and "Shukr- Gratitude" on my watercolor on canvas. The idea of trusting in the process of life allowed me to let go of my anxiety and fear of failure. Trusting myself and the destiny ahead of me allowed me to be “free” from the crippling expectations of shoulds and should haves. It reminded me that I can only worry and work on what's in front of me instead of being trapped on the should-haves of tomorrow. It allowed me to be grateful and mindful.

With these emotions in play, I challenged myself further to create art that represents what hope and happiness looks like in my artistic imagination. So I worked on the pink sunset collage. That piece took a lot from me as an artist. Grappling between perfectionism, judgment and fear of using a new medium, I constantly had to remind myself of what I wanted this piece to represent. So I created it with so much love and positivity. I was on a roll. I wanted everything that I made to bring hope to whoever is going through a rough patch as me. I wanted to reclaim my happiness.

At the end of it all, when we finally put our work on the wall, I realized that piece after piece transformed my pain into hope. Awakenings provided that safe space and community that I will forever be grateful for. A unique opportunity to create art without fear of prejudice, judgment or expectations. Awakening provided me a space to just be.

Dida



AWAKENINGS

The *Cohort Archive* documents and uplifts the experience and artworks of survivors who have gone through our Cohort program.

At Awakenings, we provide survivors of sexual violence with a trauma informed, inclusive art-making experience that encourages healing. We carry out this mission in our art studio located in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago and online.

CONNECT WITH US:

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Instagram | [@awakeningsart](#)

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INTERESTED IN A COHORT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?

If you want Awakenings to provide a healing art cohort experience for your community or clients, please email us to learn more.
info@awakeningsart.org

