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Without Words

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WITHOUT WORDS

A Thesis
Presented to the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Adrienne Lichliter
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Accepted by:
Sydney A. Cross,
Todd McDonald
Dr. Andrea Feeser
ABSTRACT

My work seeks to question culture’s occupation with the direct and conclusive, stirring the viewer away from immediate understanding in order to better grasp the pervasive vitality of the obscure. The thesis outlines the presence of the unclear in our lives and our lack of consideration of its importance due to an occupation with productivity. This argument is made with a body of non-objective artwork that presents visual and spatial ambiguities. By occupying paradoxes and indeterminate focal points, the art resists recognition and conclusion both formally and intellectually. The paper also discusses the importance of printmaking and restraint, requiring one to shift attention to the subtle and unassertive. The culmination of the visual moments aims to cause a resensitized mode of seeing for my viewer.
DEDICATIONS

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Carol and Warren Lichliter, who taught me the value of finding passion and happiness in ones work. With their support and encouragement I have found the courage to pursue that very lesson.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This accomplishment would not have been possible without the endless guidance and support from my faculty and peers. This support surpassed critique and intellectual leadership, extending to emotion encouragement and friendship. Special thanks go to my thesis committee, Todd McDonald and Andrea Feeser. I would like to especially acknowledge my advisor and thesis committee chair Sydney Cross, whose wisdom, friendship and guidance has and will always be irreplaceable. Her ability to lead her students on their own trajectories demonstrates a tremendous talent in teaching. For all this I consider myself inexplicably lucky and will be moving on with a hero to look to.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Current culture typically deems indecision, confusion, and passivity as negative notions, embracing the assertive, immediate, controlled and easily understood. Objectives are expected to be clear and outcomes definitive. With a wealth of information so accessible we not only are provided with constant answers, but are encouraged to create them, prescribing and declaring our positions at an unprecedented degree. We are flooded with statements and images that point very directly, attempting to sell or win support. This environment creates a type of fast paced attentiveness, an eye that attempts to process experience into usable and directed information. Although this attitude offers productivity and growth, it overlooks the vast reality of the unassertive, failing to realize how essential the ambiguous and indefinite is to the vitality of human existence.

As a visual artist, I intend to promote the profundity of the unformed and obscure through discouraging immediate understanding and processing, therefore recalibrating the viewer’s mode of awareness. This recalibration, or resensitization, is necessary in order to realize the power of the understated beauty I aim for. Like adjusting one’s eyes to the dark, the viewer must adjust his or her eyes from the habit of seeking recognition, letting nuances of form and surface hesitate without clarity and accepting the virtues of the enigmatic.
In a 1977 lecture in Paris writer Roland Barthes introduced the topic of “the Neutral”, a term used to refer to realities that baffle language and work outside of what can be traditionally defined. In particular Barthes emphasizes the inexhaustible presence of minutia in life, and how society and language fail to recognize it. This minutia often occupies a precarious place, vacillating between positive and negative, existent and non-existent. It is the not-quite-this and the not-yet-that in the world. Because of this borderline existence certitude is not appropriate for addressing the Neutral, and therefore it must “side-step assertion”\(^1\), working on the level of the implicit. This requires one to stupefy his or her analytic faculties to the extent of slowing down, “a kind of drip by drip understanding.”\(^2\)

It is undeniable that there is a plethora of events or visuals where a purpose does not exist; they are there whether one chooses to notice them or not- a spill on the floor, the condensation on a soda can, the tangled cords of headphones. Giving these moments consideration does not change them, for they are there carelessly, arriving without intention, offering no direction and providing no use or meaning. For this reason these occurrences are vague to us. They are integral to human experience, thus familiar and ubiquitous, but are they are also strange in that they escape categorization. These experiences are often referred to in theory as “the everyday”. Writers such as Georges Lefevre, Maurice Blanchot and George Perec

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\(^2\)Barthes 37
admit the difficulty to capture and categorize the everyday, for it is, as Perec
describes, “everywhere and nowhere at the same time”. It fills human life, but due to
its lack of specified purpose it slips “below the threshold of the noticed”\(^3\). However,
when observed and considered, these moments have the potential to provide a vivid
sensation of life, a type of splendor that is impossible without an unassuming and
equivocal existence.

In Perec’s 1974 work, *L’Especes d’Espaces*, he instructs the reader how to
resensitize themselves to a position that may extrapolate the wonder of daily
minutiae, in particular that of urban spaces. He writes,

“Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on.
Do you know how to see what’s worthy of note?
Is there anything that strikes you?
Nothing strikes you. You don’t know how to see.
You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly.
Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most
obvious, most common, most colourless.”\(^4\)

Perec points out the difficulty of this pensive and observant position, answering his
rhetorical questions with a prepared response, “Q: Is there anything that strikes
you? A: Nothing strikes you. You don’t know how to see.” We are so accustom to
devoting our attention to the purposeful, moments providing a question to answer
or a statement which requires a given stance or response. In this way we do not

\(^4\) Perec, Georges, “The Street” *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Trans. John
know how to see. The futile of the everyday is muted by the purposeful structure of
the everyday. “You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly” he says, telling
the reader that in order to comprehend and honor the frivolity one must delay the
mind.

My artistic interest stems from a constant awe of these overlooked realities,
from moments of unmatchable and spontaneous beauty. These moments do not
exist from the intention of human hand, but from its carelessness or from the decay
or growth of material. Its presence is unplanned and erratic, and from this it has a
sort of unspeakable wonder. However, my objective and practice does not seek to
replicate the form of these moments but rather replicate their elusive nature and
vitality. By displaying this quality in artwork I am encouraging my audience to
reconsider what they value as beautiful and worthy of interest, as well as evoking a
way of looking which strives to set aside the synthesis of statement and conclusion
with which our lives are so inundated.

In order to achieve both an indefinite and understated visual and mental
state for my viewer, I present printed work that encompasses suspended or
opposing visual states manifested through a restrained aesthetic. The artwork
hovers between paradoxes (dissolve and formation, density and void, focal point
and dispersion, accident and intention) preventing the viewer from conclusion.
Furthermore, by using printmaking and the incorporation of surface, the pieces
question whether they are found surface or art, seemingly to exist in an ever-
shifting space between the two. Thus, by evoking restraint, the indirect, and the
I aim to present the viewer with something that resists affirmation and concrete recognition, encouraging a suspended or slowed understanding and lingering sense of curiosity.
CHAPTER TWO
HONORING THE INDIRECT

By offering artwork that is less direct I hope to pose a different mode of communication, relying on tacit subtleties. The artwork does not demand attention, rather proffers it, coaxing and suggesting rather than forcing. This is achieved through both process and formal results, limiting and veiling the assertion of my artistic hand and preventing the viewer from finding overt focal points or subjects.

By using a printed surface, in particular copper, which has patina and scratches, and wood, which has grains and knots, I am able to incorporate and respond to spontaneous and natural moments that exist outside of my control. These grains and hiccups in the surface have a rhythm that I may supplement, aiming to act in accordance with their pace yet deviate enough to evade familiarity.

This tactic is present in *Stain’s Inquisition* (fig. 1), a wood lithography and relief piece with chine collé. Here the grain of the luan wood makes up for the majority of the piece, shifting from deep blue to radiantly soft green. I added carefully measured carving and marks to the bottom corner of the piece, along with a mere torn piece of pink translucent paper. Due to the difference in color of the pink paper, the viewer is initially drawn to it, however, once there nothing of real importance is found; it is only a scrap of color. This leads the viewer to consider the rippling luminosity in the woodgrain, confusing which aspect is to be considered as
dominant. The presence of my reticent assertions within the wood both divert and
attract notice to the printed surface of the wood, adjusting the viewers regard of
that surface.

In other work the convolution between natural occurrence and hand is
achieved with more artistic authority, relying on the action of mark making to
replicate found surface. This notion is typified in the pieces Gravity is Keeping Me Up
I (fig. 2) and II. The marks present in these two pieces were not found, but a result of
the tool used, coming down on the plate with a sharp utensil with varying force. By
using this action rather than drawing, I hinder my control over the placement of the
marks. The result is an energy that relates to what one might find in a stagnant pool
or a dusty, sunlit room. The artwork is still, yet there is movement. It is perceptible
yet unseen, like that of a glacier, seeming to shift at each blink of the eye.

By evading focal points I prevent the eye from settling at any one point,
creating a dispersion of activity that vibrates and rolls about without direction. This
dismisses the presence of a visual hierarchy, allowing the viewer to find his or her
own points of interest and emphasis. In Over and Under and Through It (fig. 3),
another wood lithography piece, I again rely heavily on surface to dictate a certain
movement with the horizontal register of the grain. However, that directionality is
offset and balanced with shadowy clouds and heavy edges. Relief cuts and
monotyping further disrupt the surface, piercing through the scummy stains with
bright white, aggressive actions. The relationship between the modes of mark
making (woodgrain, relief and lithographic washes) fluctuate, stealing attention and
falling back with various intensities. This variation keeps the composition neither even nor unbalanced, hinting at emphasis while avoiding certainty.

This preoccupation with space and mark making led me to Cy Twombly. Twombly's mark making is fascinating, for it tends to pull the viewer in unexpected directions. At moments it seems to be a sort of “all-over” composition, but his use of void and eradication of mark prevents the work from being described as such. He also employs a range marking methods including child like doodles, scribbled text and pure action from the brush or pencil. This not only prevents focal points formally, but intellectually as well, impeding the viewer from labeling the mode and purpose of those marks. In “Cy Twombly: The Natural World” James Rondeau wrote, “Today Twombly is an actively irreducible figure whose output- ever impossible to categorize or systematically decipher- remains potently aggressive and strange, experimental and willfully unresolved.”5 His ability to create work that is both engaging and undecipherable is an inspiration to me, as well as the spatial relationships he establishes in his paintings.

To explain my tendencies in spatial configuration and compositional balance, as well as the effect of the finished work, I have turned to examine connections between my art and my physical experiences as a sprinter and ballet dancer. In both sprinting and dance an incredible amount of training is necessary, refining the bodies balance and mechanics to achieve a seamless movement. I believe this

parallels my treatment of space and mark making, maintaining an equilibrium that is unsteady enough to avoid stasis, teetering without capitulation. Though the actions highly considered and involve technically complicated processes, the piece loses all traces of strain in the finished product, leaving a visual of ease which relates sensationally and metaphorically to performing trained movements.

This presence of balance is attained in the wood lithography and relief print *Puppy Love* (fig. 4). The weight of each mark, smudge and line, both those of my own doing and those of the wood, is treated in a manner that creates a composition both still and in flux, dancing across the paper with the carelessness of rustling leaves and the energy of allegro. Through my sensibilities and configurations the simple components of these marks create an exquisite elegance. The choreographed marks take the viewer through an ebb and flow of movement, remaining fluid yet quiet and controlled.

In using found material and displaying successful work without definitive focus I look to the dust painting series of Urs Fischer. In these works the artist photographs dust mites, enlarges them and silk screens them onto aluminum panels. The results range in terms of organization, but generally the strange culminations of black and gray matter scatter and clump across the surface at random. The use of screen printing and the aluminum panel create a misleading sense of depth, as the gritty dirt is strangely flat and smooth against and reflected

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surface. In these works Fischer uses a common, familiar substance in our lives and displaces it through his artistic process, allowing for the strangeness of the dust to come through honestly but in a context and application that invites the viewer to question its presence and visual weight.

By pushing my artwork and process from a peremptory position and disguising authority, I invoke a sense of humility in the work. I value existing beauties, learning from them, responding to and working with them, so that I might elevate that found quality to its deserving perplexity.
CHAPTER THREE
VISUAL OPPOSITIONS

Settling on the indefinite, accepting its obscurity and reveling in the lack of conclusion requires one to enter a state of suspension. By suspension I do not mean still, but hovering, shifting back and forth without landing. In my artwork I encourage this state formally in order to evoke it mentally, slowing the viewer down and inviting the in-between through presenting simultaneous polarities.

Activating opposing forces and moods in the work is potent as a method to suggest a suspended state to my viewer, holding them to uncertainty by equally occupying polarities. In Thomas De Quincey’s 1821 writing Confessions of an English Opium-Eater he describes a drug induced state, dictating a particular sense of calm resulting from suspending his mind in the present reality of ocean waters. He details the experience as “tranquility that seemed not a product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms; infinite activities, infinite repose.”

The idea of suspension or tranquility emerging from restless antagonisms is precisely the effect I strive to produce in my artwork, causing a lethargy in thought that is productive despite its unproductivity, allowing for an awakening through repose.

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7 De Quincey, Thomas. Confessions of an English Opium-Eater in The Neutral by Roland Barthes. 106.
In the 37”x55” drypoint piece, *Condensation of Needles* (fig. 5), I explore the paradox of openness and density as well as intimacy and expanse. The drypoint marks require immense physicality, leaving the lines perceivably aggressive, and deliberate. However, the accretion of the marks and their fuzzy quality emits a near tangible softness. The build up of marks creates a heavy solidarity, while certain areas buoyantly dissipate. This provides the viewer with something combative to the extent of anxiousness while also leaving openings to visually enter and subsequently soothe. Furthermore, the scale of the piece is confronting, but because of the detail, presence of hand and curious hiccups of light throughout the form, the viewer is provoked to experience it closely. This allows the piece to be both grand and imposing as well as meek and intimate.

In efforts to further experiment with the duality of intimacy and immensity I have made a collection of miniature work that is offered to the audience to hold by hand in a secluded space. Looking at the work in a personal space allows the piece to become private and encompassing, subverting its scale. This possession allows the viewer to sit and contemplate the piece like a novel or journal. They may handle the paper and adjust its position to the eye and to the light, investigating in a way that is impossible once framed and mounted. Additionally, being unsigned, and without the presence of recognizable subject matter, the viewer must decide upon its orientation, allowing he or she to consider the composition on their own, relating to the way I consider the compositions as the creator.
While focusing on the idea of an ambiguously existing form rather than a dispersal of choreographed marks, I began to consider the presence of what might be considered “something”. By this a mean an inexplicable thing, an object or a depiction of an object that has a sense of thingness, but cannot be placed, therefore being referred to as something. According to Lefebvre in *Breaking the Ground* this something occupies the “real and unreal, a place of transitions, of meetings, interactions and conflicts. In short a level of reality”\(^8\) There must be a sense of presence or life in order for the occurrence to feel like a thing, but that notion is unidentifiable, presenting and contradicting.

In Jane Bennet’s 2004 essay “The Force of Things: An Ecological Step Toward Matter” she argues the existence of “Thing Power”, describing a perceptible spirit in material things that lies outside of their intended use in human life. She incorporates Henry Thoreau’s notion of the Wild saying, “...there is an existence peculiar to a thing that is irreducible to the thing’s imbrication with human subjectivity. It is due to this otherness or wildness that things have the power to addle and rearrange thoughts and perceptions.”\(^9\) This idea of thing relates to my previous exploration of found surface in that a thing can bear an uncanny living quality with the potential to jolt understanding outside of a function or prescribed meaning.

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In *Something*, a 7”x7” mezzotint (fig. 6), I created a solid, ambiguous shape within a square border. The mezzotinting process makes a velvet, luscious black, but the unrefined, furry edges and their proximity to the border of the plate activate a strangeness or, as Thoreau described, an otherness and wildness. The scratchy qualities are also echoed in the negative space, suggesting the possibility that the solid mass is made up of fluctuating parts. These qualities provide the mass with a sense of character or personality in both the qualities of line and mass as well as the way that it lives in its space. It has a singularity and focus like a portrait without objectivity or personhood.

The silk-screen work of Christopher Wool inspires my use of form within a space, as well as a presentation of banality and strangeness. In this series he documents what might be seen as stains or blobs, but displaces them through the process of screen printing, using moiré and misalignment. The overt presentation of printing pulls the form away from the spilt quality, causing an intriguing tension between the spontaneous existence of the spill and the deliberate process of the screen print. Furthermore, the masses expand over the entire linen canvas, obscuring the figure/ground relationship.¹⁰

In the relief and screen print, *Respire* (fig. 7) I make a much clearer sense of foreground and background with the large golden, brown mass dominating the space. However, like Wool’s work, this dominance is made strange by its size,

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¹⁰ Godfrey, Mark. “Stain Resistance” from *The Painting Factory: Abstraction after Warhol*. 56
reaching the ends of the paper and pressing out of the faint relief borders. Also, the
gold mass is clumsily solid, leaving exceptions to its weight as the oil-based ink
below rejects the water-based ink of the form. A faint layer of reflective pink, as
well as a thin, transparent tear of paper, lay over the top of the form attributing to
its strangeness, as it shifts and shimmers according to the viewer’s position. The
collaged paper is left mostly unattached, enabling it to flutter and breath. The oddity
and simplicity of the blotch-like mass has the quality of being both common place
and bizarre, bestowing a sense of life to the thing, an existence relevant to the words
of Maurice Blanchot, being “in a moment of living.”

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Restraint runs throughout my art, applying to the limit of my hand, the limiting of statement, but also in the decision making itself. I find it important to be tactful in implementing my artistic voice, being careful to offer only what is necessary rather than something saturated with images, activity and color. For me, to be able to coerce the audience to my work with subtly and passivity provides a challenge that is essential to the act of resensitization, like leaning in to hear a whisper.

In *Without Words* (fig. 8), an etching, the presence of subtlety becomes subject. The values are airy and light, and at moments nearly non-existent, meeting the plate tone it swims in. Within the composition is a barely perceptible form, only hinting at definition with its wispy presence. The process of spit-bite etching also bestows an aqueous condition to the faint values, making them even more fragile and enigmatic.

A large portion of my work is achieved through hues of black and grey. Even when using primary pigments, the color is dulled and brought down in intensity. This promotes subtlety and additionally creates a conflicting mood, presenting something both seductively rich but also potentially ominous, as seen in the etching
**Twinkling** (fig. 9). This supports my portrayal of the in-between and the not yet, maintaining an unconcluded stance for my viewer.

The alluring potential of black and white is seen clearly in photography, where the subject is altered to a colorless state to project a different mood or sentiment. Furthermore, by reducing the composition to black and white formal concerns such as contrast are heightened, revealing to the viewer distinctions of light that may go overlooked with color vying for attention. This transformation is apparent in the landscape work of Frederick Sommer, where arid grounds and overlooks become quiet and strange, giving the grandiose a subdued quality. The converse occurs for contemporary artist N. Dash, who documents deconstructed, lint-ball-like cotton scraps in blown up silverprints. Scale, formal backdrop and monochrome bestow a poetic presence to these meager scraps, turning dilapidated fabrics into exalted enigmas.

**Grounding I** (fig. 10) is a simple form resting in the composition of the intaglio plate, printed in black on a pale blue paper. The aquatinted shape leans back, just barely not reaching the edges of the plate-tone border. Throughout the piece the even, soft etch of the aquatint is interrupted, including a light drip coming through the center. The mass around the drip relates to a woman’s belly, giving a strange photographic and fleshy sense to the simple, non-objective form. The sparseness in the tone allows the cool paper to affect the black. Through my investigation of black, I have found that by avoiding start white paper, I skew the
black and white relationship, mellowing contrast as well as exhibiting the dynamic nature of the singular color.

For me printmaking is essential for incorporating restraint in that it provides a distance from my hand, hiding the actuality of the image until it passes through the process of another element - the press. It requires me to slow down, not being able to instantly access a visual. Being that the nature of the process is indirect, the very medium bolsters my objective of resisting immediacy. This is communicated to the viewer as well, who does not see that actual plate I work with, but rather the residue from that plate, making the outcome more perplexing and dynamic.

Composer and artist John Cage also appreciated printmaking for the distance it provides from the hand. Cage advocated modesty in artwork, limiting the assertion of self and avoiding intensity. This outlook reflected his practice of Zen Buddhism, which calls to communicate with simplicity and reserve. For Cage, who included chance and relinquished control in his process, pulling a print from the press was an event of surprise, for he did not consider himself responsible for the artwork; he simply bore witness to its spectacular arrival.¹²

My tactfully measured and restricted mark making is particularly evident in the process of intaglio, which has the ability to reveal in steps my measured process of application and erasure. I can begin the image with a spontaneous or careless act,

print it out, consider it, and then work back into it, carefully constructing a balance between activity and stillness, presence and absence.

In my latest series, *Eyelids* (fig. 11-13), I embarked etching on a large scale in order to encompass the viewer, and to create an affecting context where activity is surrounded by inactivity, and tiny moments begin to feel remarkably stunning. Because the piece is editioned and displayed in stages, the viewer’s awareness of the delicately shifting values becomes increasingly heightened as forms and values arrive and disappear. In the act of comparison this viewer elevates the act of looking to the act a searching, requiring an intensified type of attention. Also important to this print is a much more complicated implementation of restraint. The hand is quite active in the creation, however, that activity is obscured through the process of etching, and the aspect of labor less perceptible. The result is an undulating space that is involved yet languid, being amazingly intricate without being overwrought.
As an artist, and as an observer, I am endlessly fascinated by moments not deemed worthy of attention. This does not mean they are downtrodden, just simply overlooked. In Alexandra Horowitz's book *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes* she discusses our limits to truly see everything, attributing this neglect to the demand for concentration in our lives. At this very moment, in order for you to pay attention to this writing you are pushing away what is extraneous, attempting to not be distracted by the buzz or the lights, the breeze from the AC or the nature of the surface bearing your weight. This becomes necessary to productively function, but we have trained ourselves to act and see in this mode at a near constant rate. This is why one should be resensitized why I intend to do it in my work. To say this process is imperative would overstep my purpose, for it is not dyer, however by reconsidering the ranking of what receives attention, a new world is presented. It is a matter of missing what is there because it is not providing you with a clear advancement. My work is a plea to recalibrate this practiced attention, to slow down and look, to be swept up in what is nothing, in what Blanchot calls the “visible-invisible”.

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14 Blanchot, 40
This sweep can be immediate or it may take time. For this reason it is necessary to create a pause, suspending my viewer and resisting conclusion through what De Quincey calls “restless antagonisms”. To do this it is necessary to subtract the classifiable, not allowing the eye or mind to conclude and label. Without clarity to latch onto, one becomes intrigued by formal delights, washing over the surfaces, the grains, the scratches, being enchanted by an unfolding and contracting state of being which is familiar without being certain. Eventually, by dulling one mode of awareness for another, the world becomes swimming in profound yet quiet events, letting the mind drink from its ineffable distractions.
FIGURES

Fig. 1 *Stain’s Inquisition*

Mokulito with relief and chine collé
Fig. 2 Gravity is Keeping Me Up I
Fig. 3 *Over and Under and Through It*

Wood lithography with relief and viscosity printing
Fig. 4 *Puppy Love*

Wood lithography and relief
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Drypoint and chine collé
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Mezzotint
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Relief and screen print with collage
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Fig. 9 *Twinkling*

Etching
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Etching
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Etching
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Etching
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Etching
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