

# REPINE

by

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I've always felt an insurmountable pressure to perfectly encapsulate my narrative in a way that is quick and easy. But in a world that simplifies the everyday, I recognize the sheer amount of complexity we are capable of can't be as condensed or ignored, and there are many existential matters to address. Working with etching, digital and relief printing techniques, I incorporate aspects of domestic scenes from my own life as a means of exploring the reality of existing, with all of its positive and negative aspects, and the confusion that surrounds it. My work expresses how my past experience affects my everyday life and interpersonal relationships. It narrates my struggles with self growth and acceptance in a relatable manner that reveals an opportunity for self reflection and growth within the viewer.

A face is the most recognizable and memorable feature in basic human nature, and instinctively within the first milliseconds of meeting a person you can determine traits such as status, trustworthiness, success and dominance level. (Dolan) A common theme in my work is the removal of faces. This allows the viewers to insert themselves into a pseudo-familiar scene and create parallels between their own life dynamics. Simultaneously it creates an interesting juxtaposition between the typical family photo of love and happiness, with loneliness and otherness. My work opens a dialogue and expresses my experiences with mental health and its relation to race (specifically within the black community), the general feeling of inadequacy, and the correlations within family dynamics.

A variety of reasons prevent African Americans from seeking quality mental health care, ranging from socioeconomic factors to shame. I feel a responsibility as an artist to address this issue in a way that not only incorporates my own narrative and experiences, but also reflects the bigger problems that plague much of the black community. Charles White believed that art had a role to play in changing the world: "Art must be an integral part of the struggle. It can't simply mirror what's taking place. It must adapt itself to human needs. It must ally itself with the forces of liberation. I have no use for artists who try to divorce themselves from the struggle." (MoMA) I strongly align myself to his belief that artists have always been propagandists, and I want this project to reflect that. It is important for the starting point of my work to be broad and general, but to end in a place that is very specific to my life. By speaking about issues of the community but using myself as an example, examining my real, complex, and often turbulent emotions, I can give voice to often unspoken issues of mental health in the contemporary black community.

I use concepts related to memory, psychology, and basic human emotions to convey larger themes of portraiture, loneliness, insecurity and mental health seen within black culture. Using my family to create parallels, I open up a dialogue to raise awareness, and express these conflicting emotions within. It is easier to express myself through visual work than through words. Creating this work is cathartic. Upon viewing and analyzing my finished work, I often create deeper meaning and arrive at issues that are more complex than before I started.

Throughout creating my pieces, I have developed a language that relies on the importance of pattern paired with the removal of defining elements. Following in the footsteps of Kerry James Marshall's drawings and Toyin Odutola's paintings, I use patterning in clothing to help construct an experience for the viewer and give a sense of life in imagery that removes the physical form. The patterning in my prints relates to that of a domestic scene; furnishings and designs that are vaguely recognizable or placeable in a personal context to the viewer. According to Psychologist G. Stanley Hall, "Man is largely a creature of habit, and many of his

activities are more or less automatic reflexes from the stimuli of his environment.” I believe this to be true, and I want to invoke a sense of automatic response from the viewer by building up a personality of sorts without actually articulating the figures completely.

My prints oscillate between the familiar and the foreign, which plays into several of my thematic concepts. The familiar domestic scenes and family portraiture juxtaposed with the specific imagery that relates to my family is a way to generalize while simultaneously getting a sense of concrete evidence to support the existence of the struggle with personal visual anecdotes. I want to talk about the mental health experience in a broader sense to establish a connection with the viewer, but also shift the focus to show its prevalence within African American community.

Despite progress made over the years, racism still plays a large factor on mental health in the Black community. Negative stereotypes and attitudes of rejection associated with African Americans have decreased, but continue to occur with adverse consequences. Historical and contemporary instances of negative treatment has led to a mistrust of authorities, many of whom are seen as having the best interests of African Americans in mind. (MHA) This affirms feelings of otherness that many African American people experience in their lifetime, which can take a severe toll on one’s mental health; the feeling of not belonging and just knowing at any moment there is a possibility for rejection or mistreatment because of your ethnicity. Socioeconomic factors also affect the ability of many African Americans to receive treatment; according to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2012, 19% of African Americans had no form of health insurance, making treatment options less available or a financial hardship they cannot afford to take on.

I think about otherness in a more general setting, but also within my home and with my peers. Because of the way I dress and the way I talk, departing from the cultural norm and the way that my family was raised, I was already the odd one out. When my mental health issues became more prevalent, they only served to make me feel more ostracized from my family. Like the postmodernist writings of Bell Hook, they too hold onto an idea of an “essential blackness” and what that would look like. Since the peak of my mental health issues, I’ve felt a disconnect between myself and my own family, feeling of being incapable of asking for help without disappointing them. Growing up with physical and addiction problems is vastly different than dealing with the instability of mental health. Although a lot of people in my family have had mental health disorders, it’s always been regarded differently and rarely discussed; much of my family was even skeptical about them existing, especially ones without physical symptoms.

In the African American community, many people misunderstand what a mental health condition is and the lack of knowledge leads many to believe that having a mental health condition is a personal weakness or, in religious households, even be seen as an act of punishment from God. (NAMI) The reluctance to discuss mental health issues and seek treatment because of the shame and stigma associated with such conditions is a familiar sentiment in the community, one I’ve personally experienced. On more than one occasion, my mom has attributed my mental health conditions to the rock music I listened to; sometimes I wonder if this was to help cope with the unnecessary guilt she felt as my parent. Additionally, parents often take it personally as the child being ungrateful or disrespectful, or blame themselves for their parenting skills and what they were able to provide. The onset of my

depression began in third grade at the age of nine; even then I felt an unspoken stigma against talking about these sorts of things, the precedent being my father.

My biological father, separated from my mother, has been living with schizophrenia since his mid twenties. To this day, I have never heard my grandmother (whom he lives with) address his medically diagnosed mental illness. She attributes his mental condition to “some bad drugs he must’ve done.” It speaks volumes that she would rather publicize his drug use as a scapegoat, than to actually open up a conversation about psychological health. During times of emotional stress many African Americans believe that relying on family and religious communities will be enough to combat their problems, when the majority of the time seeking help from a mental health professional would be the best option. (MHA) My mother and my paternal grandmother are firm believers that if you turn to God, he’ll help you if you’re a true believer in Christ or that these hardships are “all in his plans” and will pass.

Curious about the foundation of the associations my family has formed about mental illnesses, I turned to printmaking as a way to research and think deeply about mental health awareness in the African American community. My first series of prints are etchings, establishing a starting reference points for my narrative. The eight pieces depict members of my family in various times throughout my life. Based off of actual photographs, the 4x6 inch etchings encapsulate an unsettling feeling within staged family portraiture. Interested in the falsities photography allows my memory to create, and events in time that I can barely remember, I often draw imagery from family portraiture. The first image, *Aola and Justin* depicts a younger version of my mother and one of my uncles on a couch in their childhood home. This piece is primarily about her turbulent relationship with my Uncle. They clearly and undoubtedly love each other, but disagree on their relationship with their father and how he’d treated them in their childhood. My mother was able to forgive and forget and build a close relationship with my grandfather, whereas my uncle has not. This continues to drive a wedge and stir conflict between them. My mother loves him and understands, but just wishes for her family to be united. The toilsome relationships within my family definitely affect my mother psychologically and puts an unnecessary stress on her life. Navigating and planning her life around feuds but still wishing to be involved in her family was a calculated and stressing task. Along the way, she herself had become diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and I feel like that made her realize the realness of these conditions.

Continuing this series, I realize that while my goal was to explain more about the family dynamic my mother had growing up and how it’s taken a toll on her mental health, I’ve noticed a larger pattern that plagues my family as a whole. I decided to not only include imagery of my mother and her brothers, but to incorporate a subtle uneasiness to various other domestic scenes that surround primarily happy memories within my family that no longer exist due to strenuous relationships my family endures, aided by the untreated traumas, mental health issues, addiction and economical trouble among us.

Another digital print, “*Zoom*” shows me and my brother sliding down a slide in a park in the Bronx, a place we would go often with my godmother and godsister. My brother and I haven’t always gotten along, but when we were younger I felt this idolization of him, this want to be as strong and smart as he was. This print addresses the time I felt so close to him, and close

to the thought that a life like his was attainable for me. As I grew up and withdrew more into myself, the kindred feeling I felt with my brother diminished and so did our relationship.

My next print, an 22x30 inch digital print entitled "*tell me how you feel about me*" depicts a collaged drawing of young girl on a patterned couch with a photographic element in the picture frame. The photo within the frame is an expression of the disconnect I feel within my family and begins to talk about otherness within an already othered group. It mainly expresses the nostalgia surrounding me feeling fully included in my family. The unpredictableness of my mood and actions from day to day, I know it can be difficult to interact with me; I catch myself on more than one occasion being unnecessarily aggressive or grumpy. Their lack of knowledge about mental health disorders and symptoms furthering the divide between my family and I. I can feel the shift within me, but feel helpless to prevent it. A common symptom of various mental illnesses is the tendency to withdraw and isolate from your surroundings.

Line and solids were very important visual elements for me in this print. Speaking on the fragility of memory and mental health, the seemingly unfinished composition, and sense of floating in space signify the up-in-the-air feeling I feel so frequently. The imagery of me on an unfinished couch, everything depicting the fluctuation of feeling and memory. Each object of furniture collaged in the drawing represents a member of my immediate family that lives with me and has had our relationship affected due to my illnesses; the china plate being my grandpa, the couch being my grandma, a lamp table for my mother and so-forth. This print occupies a space of reflection where I address the intense nostalgia about how central I used to feel in the equation of my family, but also unattached I've felt most recently. The inclusion of the etching of *The Crew* in the picture frame references that, but also has my figure highlighted to further show the sense of otherness I experience in my family.

My linocut prints entitled "*You In Your Head Tonight, Stranger?*" are about the interpersonal relationships I have and how my mental health issues with anxiety and depression affect them. Here, I am still working with the idea of establishing an identity of sorts through the removal of key information but still leaving the minimum amount of information to allow the viewers to establish some form of a judgement of character identity. The imagery for these carvings is based off of polaroid photographs taken during social events with my friends. Often within a social gathering with my peers, I feel a sense of uneasiness or othering, even if among very close friends. My mental illnesses can override any thought I know logistically and send me into a depressive episode. Growing up with the stigmas I faced at home, it is still very hard for me to express my emotions and break the taboo ideology of talking about mental illness. This makes getting close to someone very difficult, and leaves me feeling ostracized at any point for not being "normal" or someone finding out and thinking that I'm "crazy".

The title "You In Your Head..." comes from my anxious, overthinking tendencies that arise at the most inconvenient times. They cause me to retreat into my head and enter a dissociative state, furthering the separation and otherness I feel from those around me. There has been countless times at a party where I've been approached, or my friends can sense me not being all there. I have made works about this previously - the feeling of being included but also separate. Even with my friends suffering from mental illness I feel a disconnect because they seem to be able to remain composed and power through and I feel weak for not being able to do the same. Even though I've been told by countless mental health professionals that there

are no scientific validity to the stigma surrounding mental health, I can't help but feel like a burden for even talking about my experience. Depression is like my own worst bully; it knows what insecurities to target to make me feel even more isolated and fundamentally flawed.

I've spent a lot of time ignoring my mental health and letting the stigmas surrounding getting treatment hold me back from living a fulfilled, and at the very least, a more comfortable life. So now I repine; I fully express my experiences with mental health as an African American woman, and shed light on this issue and let others they're not alone. There's absolutely nothing wrong with seeking help and gaining more self awareness. This entire project is a large step in the right direction for me, renouncing the shame and acknowledging credible research to realize that my thoughts are valid.

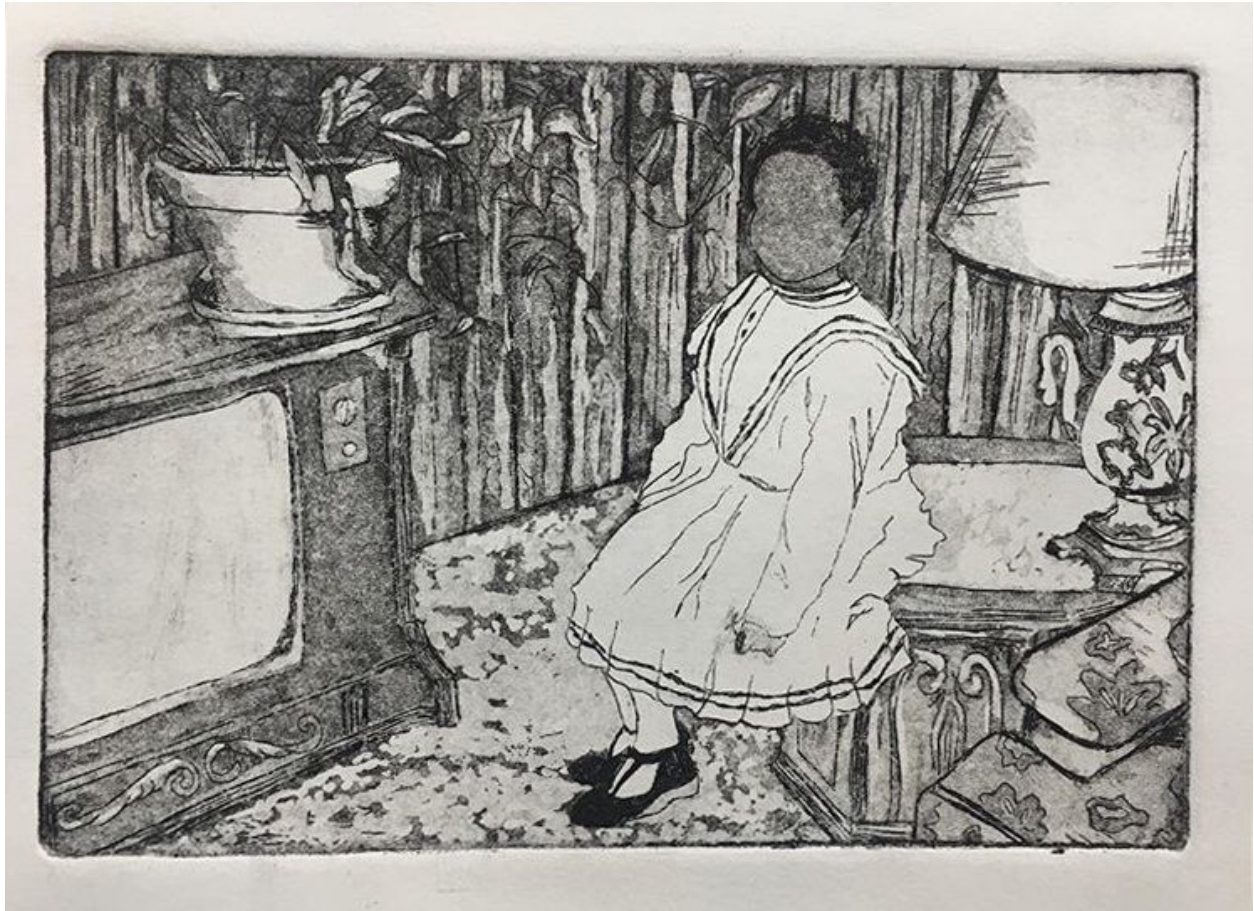


*"Aola and Justin" (1 of 8)*

Intaglio

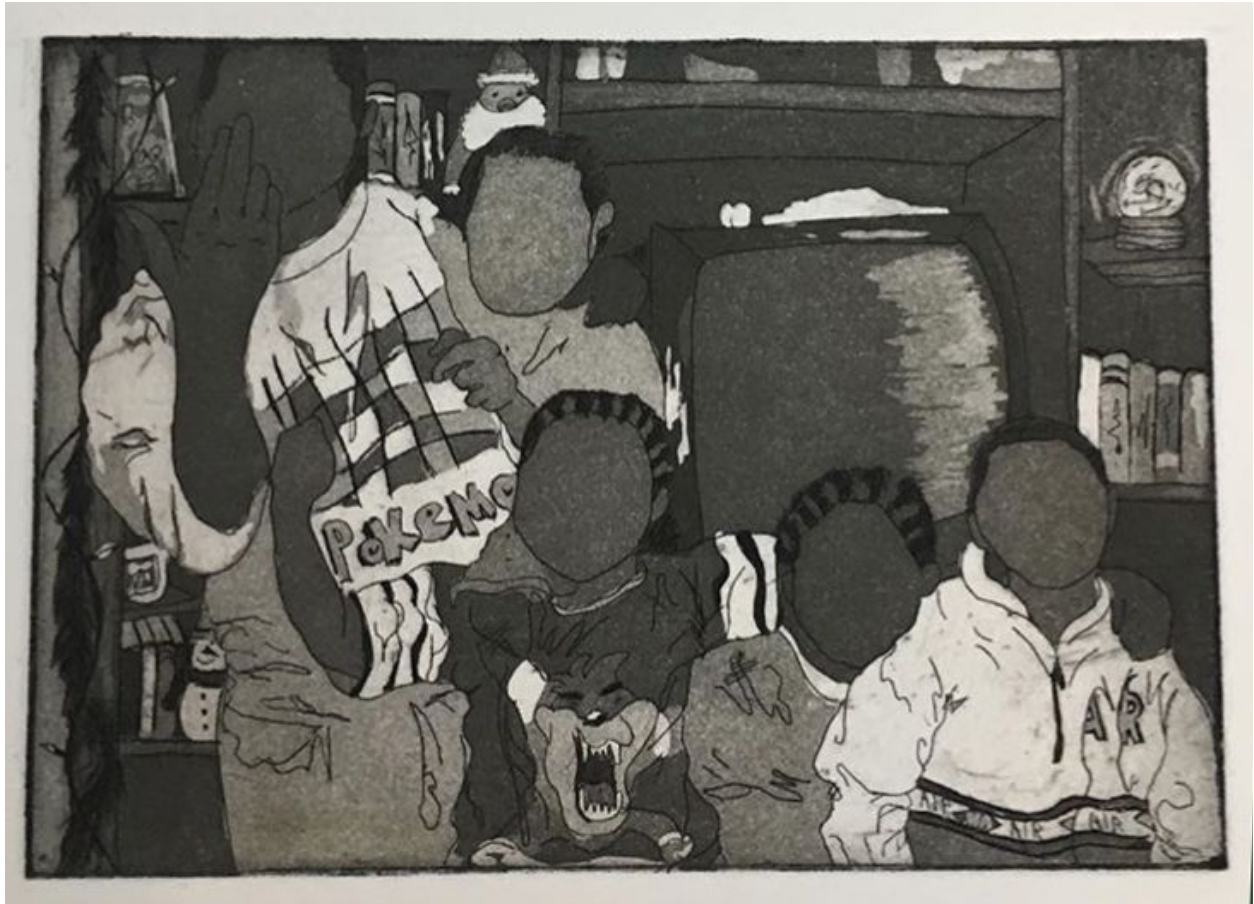
4 x 6 inches

Sirene Crawford 2018



*"Aola" (2 of 8)*  
Intaglio  
4 x 6 inches  
Sirene Crawford 2018





*"The Crew" (3 of 8)*

Intaglio

4 x 6 inches

Sirene Crawford 2018



*"Siyah and Jazzy" (4 of 8)*

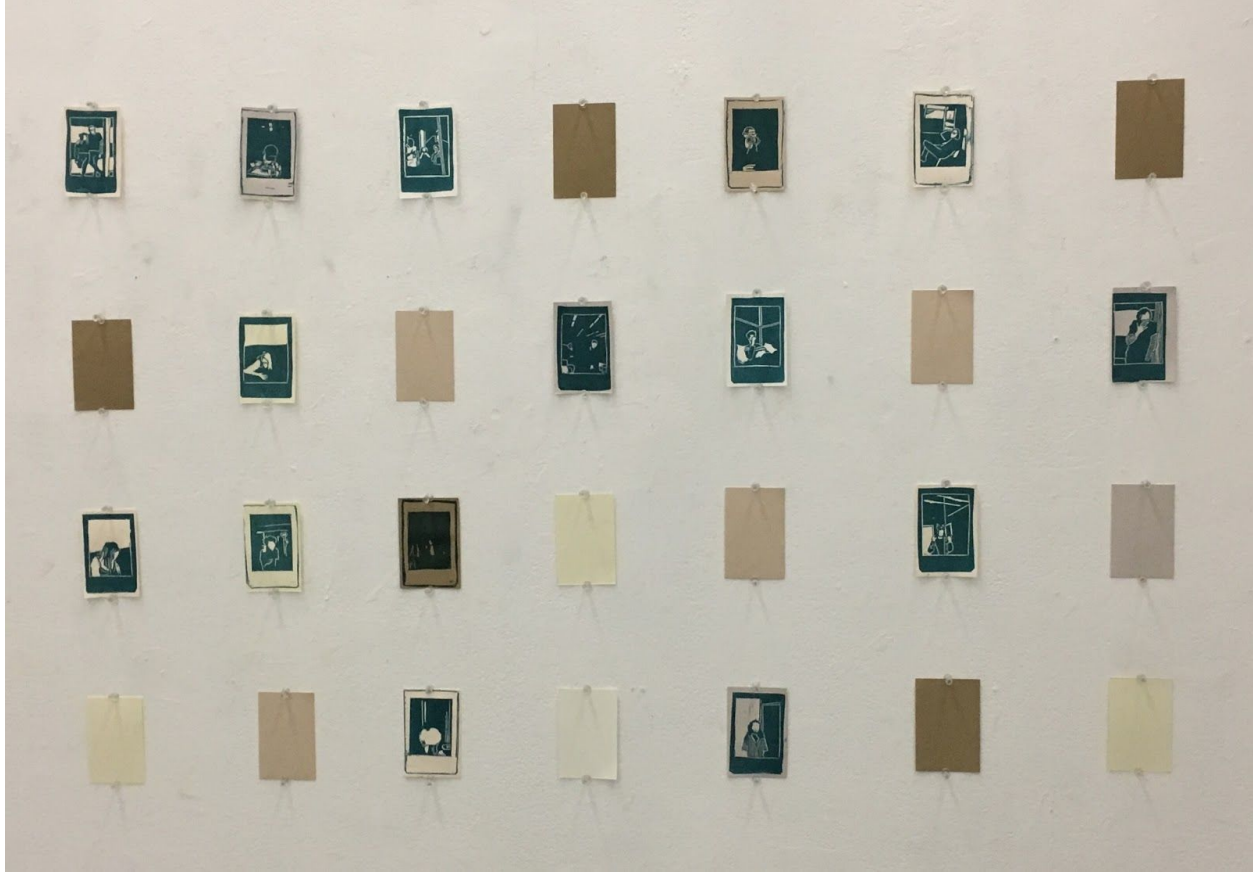
Intaglio

4 x 6 inches

Sirene Crawford 2018



*Sirene and Jamal (5 of 8)*  
Intaglio  
4 x 6 inches  
Sirene Crawford 2018

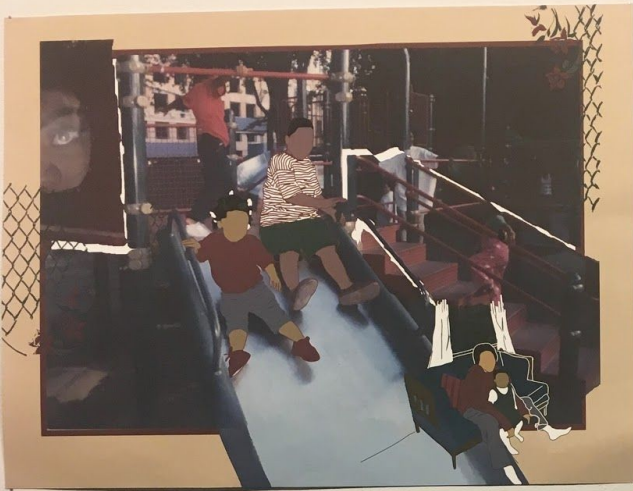


*"You in your head tonight, Stranger?"*

Linocut

28 pieces of colored stonehenge, 2.5 x 3.5 inches each

Sirene Crawford 2019



(top left)  
*"Zoom"*  
Digital Print  
22 x 30 inches  
Sirene Crawford 2019



(bottom right)  
*"tell me how you feel about me"*  
Digital Print  
22 x 30 inches  
Sirene Crawford 2019

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