

Building Characters: Using Shapes to Communicate Emotion
and Story in Narrative Art

by

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ABSTRACT

The use of shape in the early stages of the creative process allows for artistic products to be built as a whole rather than separate parts sitting on a one-dimensional plane or appearing without form. Regardless of style, the ability to comprehend and find meaning in an artwork is often based on the individual experiences of the viewer. Using shape as a foundation of the creation of one's work creates possible common ground among viewers, resulting in a more comprehensive experience. My thesis investigates how shapes psychologically impact viewer interpretation of narrative art. The ten illustrations I completed focus on using shapes to portray different insects in a stylistic interpretation and their anecdotal qualities rather than just literal anatomical subject matter. These illustrations emphasize the importance of shape-building as an integral part of unification, personality, and the communication of character to an audience.

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PREFACE

Marcos Mateu-Mestre's *Framed Ink: Drawing and Composition for Visual Storytellers* discusses the art of recreation and states "no matter how hard we try, we will never represent 'reality as it is', simply because we each have our own unique version of reality in our minds" (Mateu-Mestre). Each person's reality is a reflection of their personal experiences, opinions, and environments. For my creative thesis, I explore the impact of shape building, the art of using basic shapes to build complex figures through a thorough analysis of shape-based storytelling media, to create a collection of ten narrative art pieces that were shown in a final online exhibition and collected viewer feedback on how the shapes used influenced their perceptions.

My inspiration for this project was a combination of my initial thesis idea and an outside project I had thought about pursuing. When I began my thesis in 2021, the title was *Building Environments: Using Shapes to Communicate Emotion and Story in Narrative Art*. It was going to be a collection of ten pieces using shape as a focus to build environments with strong emotion and anecdotal qualities rather than just a literal interpretation of the subject matter. They would be 11" x 17" pieces hung on cylindrical posts to immerse the viewer. This, ideally, would emphasize the importance of shape building as an integral part of unification, building the piece as a whole rather than focusing on its separate parts, and communicating effective storytelling and compelling emotion to the viewer.

I began my research for my thesis initially with a study of the psychology of shapes. Emotionally, shapes can reflect or "reveal their personality and character traits," as discussed in a NYX Ditech blog entry "Understanding the Psychology of Shapes to

Design Better” including categories of shapes like squares and rectangles, circles, ovals, triangles, expanding to shapes with suggested boundaries like spirals, abstract and natural shapes (NYX Ditch). This partners with the cultural influence of shape meaning explained in Steven Bradley’s article, which he introduces with questions like “What do you feel when you see a circle? A square? A triangle? Are you affected the same when seeing an object with soft gentle curves as you are when seeing another object with sharp jagged edges?” (Bradley) One of these suggested articles is posted on the website, *What's Your Sign*, entitled "Simple Symbol Meaning," which comments that “When we begin to see our world in simple shapes, our reality begins to simplify, and awareness comes about in a natural flow” (Avia). When writing a paper for school, an eraser is used to remove mistakes. In art, an eraser can be used to build or integrate basic pieces together. An artist may draw a large circle to sketch a portrait that they will alter erase. The circle was not a mistake, but merely a building block that has been added to and can now be adjusted to join with the new lines and features it laid the foundation for.

As I researched and analyzed different animations with deep references to shape-building in their environments, I found myself more drawn to the characters: their exaggerated stances and the clear shapes used in their forms were so enchanting to look at and interpret. I had begun sketching the environments I wanted to use for my thesis, and it was not coming to me. I had taken a break to complete my daily sketch, a warmup to keep myself



Figure 1: Wasp Pre-Design

creative. The theme was “wasp,” so I drew a highly stylized wasp, not initially realizing the shapely influences that had come through. When I had finished the first piece, I closeted it, posted it on a few of my pages and didn’t think about it. I continued to struggle with building environments from scratch with no real drive or inspiration. Later on, as a recess from homework and stress, I went back to my wasp drawing and drew a bee to act as a clear contrast in form and intention. It was then that I was hit with the issue of my thesis: I was trying to build character with a more direct connection with



Figure 2: Bee Pre-Design

characters. Growing up on my grandparent’s farm, I had always been intrigued by insects, specifically how they look. The shape of their wings and bodies and how they acted in nature inspired many stories I used to scare my cousins. They seemed like the perfect focus for a project like this, as they could be padded with so much character and personality. With this direction and drive to push my thesis, I finally was able to start pushing my vision forward.

The resulting project is what I show now, a collection of ten pieces investigating how shapes psychologically impact viewer interpretation of narrative art. Ten pieces would cover five insects with two pieces for each, one showing the insects and the shapes of focus, and one of them in a natural environment to further highlight their character. The illustrations focus on using shapes to portray different insects in a stylistic interpretation and their more anecdotal qualities rather than just literal anatomical subject

matter. These illustrations emphasize the importance of shape-building as an integral part of unification, personality, and the communication of character to an audience.

Finishing the illustrations, I had planned to showcase them in a public exhibition. Time did not permit this, however, and I ended up exhibiting the pieces on an Instagram page titled “The Narrative of Shapes in Art.” It linked to a survey that gauged viewer response. My ultimate goal for my thesis was to complete a series of illustrations that could educate people and show the power of shape building in art while creating a space for them to think about how it made them feel or react psychologically to the subject matter. While an electronic exhibition was not my first choice, I hoped that it would be a more accessible and welcoming platform reaching more people.

METHODOLOGY

To create this collection of shape focused insect recreations, I researched the psychological effects of different shapes and what they generally represented in art. I combined this with an analysis of story-based media by productions by Studio Ghibli and Disney and cartoons like The Simpsons, The Looney Toons, and Avatar: The Last Airbender. The illustrations were completed with Procreate on my iPad, an

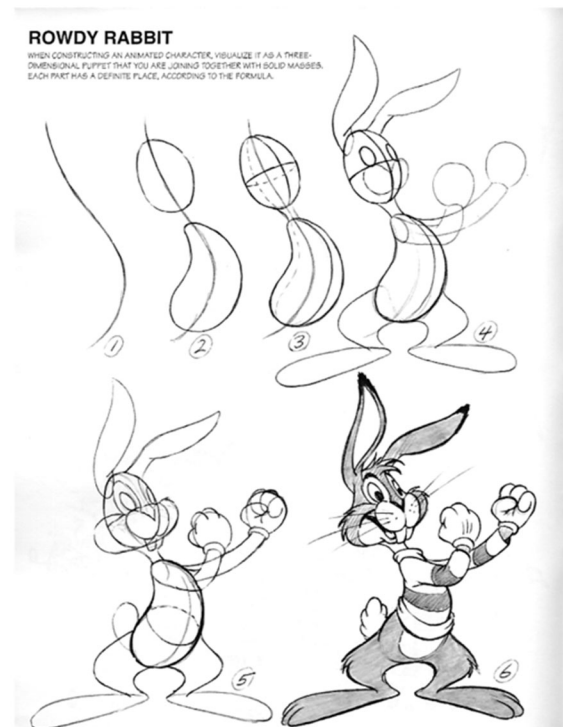


Figure 3: Rowdy Rabbit Character Construction

art program exclusive to Apple products. I had been using Procreate throughout my art classes during college career and took this as an opportunity to explore a style I could see myself carrying on in future projects while taking advantage of the portability of always having my iPad with me. I explored the extensive library of brushes and blending modes to fit how I worked traditionally, or on paper. Working on an iPad or digitally also meant I was able to update my thesis director more frequently, keeping both of us on the same page. My experiences through completing this thesis have not only changed my processes as an artist and taught me about shape building and the process of completing a large project, but laid the groundwork for future projects and rekindled my love for art that had started to dull in the constant grind of drawing only for assignments.

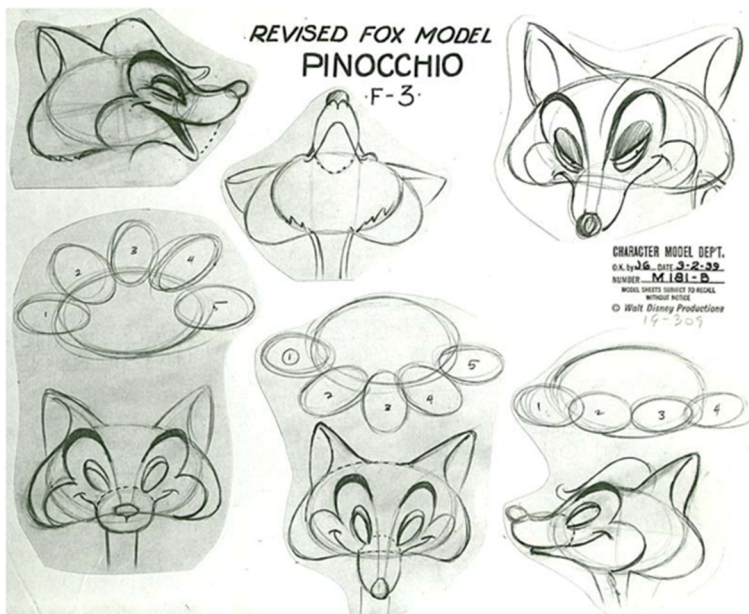


Figure 4: "Honest John" Face Model Shape Construction

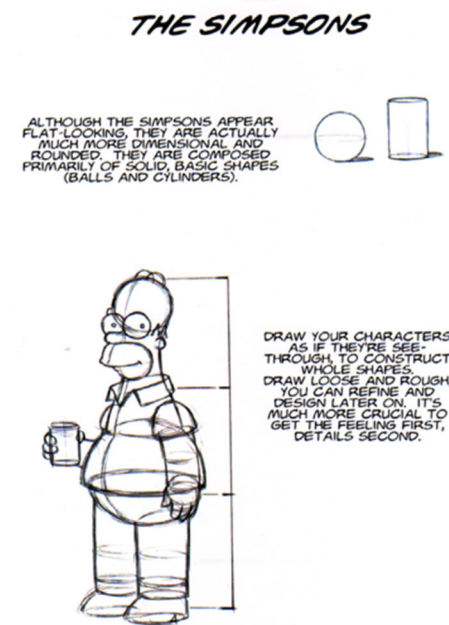


Figure 5: Homer Simpson Shape Building Explanation

For publication, I decided to make flyers with Canva and online publicity, aside from the Instagram page acting as the gallery, included Facebook, Snapchat, and Tik

Tok. The process in its entirety was my biggest struggle with trial and error, but I learned so much along the way.

Sketches: Setting the Foundation

My sketches were based on a broad study of several different insects to decide which would be used in the final project. Based on my personal connections

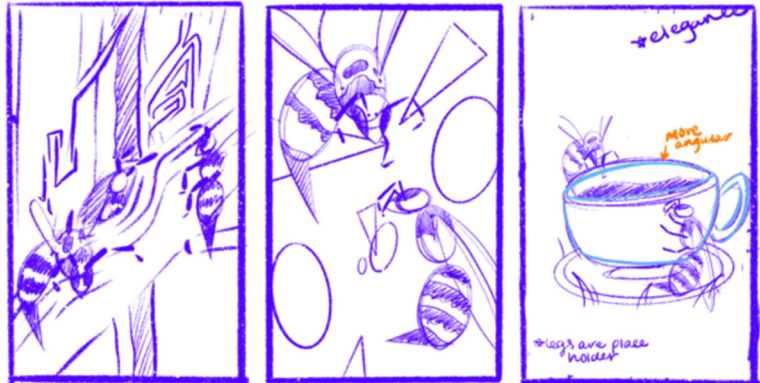


Figure 5: Wasp Sketches

and their relations to each other, my thesis director and I selected wasps, bees, cicadas, moths, and flies: insects seen (or heard) in everyday life but viewed through assumptions and stereotypes. I read articles on their life cycles and general facts to better understand why they had the anatomical pieces they did, and then set to sketching. The bees and wasps were direct opposites in my eyes, wasps being aggressive and sharp, drawing a triangular focus. Bees were softer, as they don't sting, and offered safety for me,



Figure 7: Bee Sketches

therefore getting a more circular focus.

Partnering these with a more anatomical focus, I sketched them side by side to make sure I drew a clear juxtaposition between the two. I wanted to show how I viewed them through shape. I am not scared of wasps, but in character, I wanted

to show them as aggressive and arrogant, even snobbish, and elegant. The bees were to be more friendly and soft, warm, comfortable, not at all the threatening aura of the wasp. I followed this kind of analysis of how they looked in real life versus what I wanted to highlight and what shapes I wanted to highlight for the other 4 insects sketches.

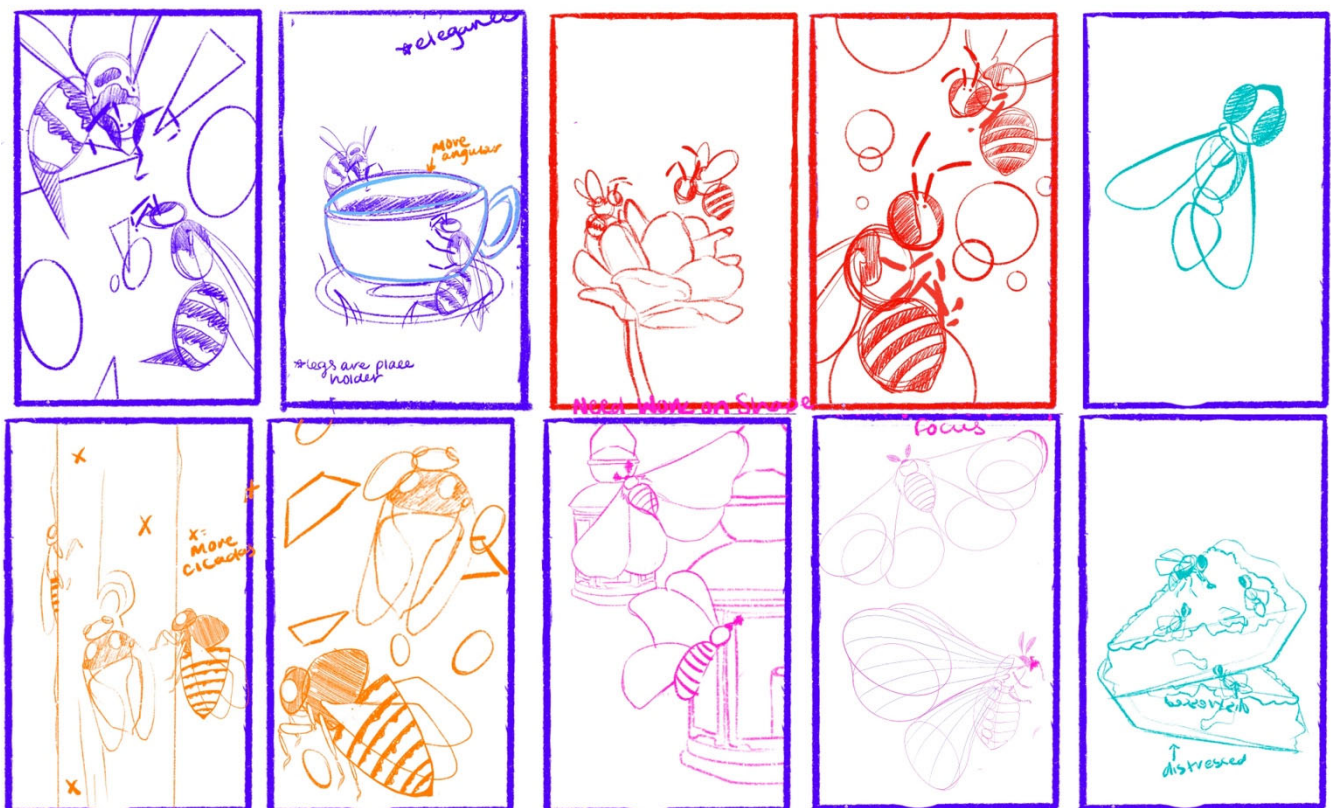


Figure 8: Insect Sketch Page

Rendering: Shaping My Characters

To complete the drawings, I was taking heavily stylistic approach. The shading was rough and not blended, and I wanted it to be lineless as to not take away from the detailing I would do with shading. Rather than use line to separate forms, I used it to highlight the shapes and their form. Every color used and shading decision made was done with the intention of highlighting shape. It was here I was able to see any inconsistencies with the character of the insects on how they interacted with their environments.

Wasps

As stated above, I wanted to show the wasps as strong and aggressive.

My research had determined wasps to be tied to the distinguished or snobbish, so I wanted to give them a sense of arrogance and elegance at the same time. Bees and wasps are generally avoided, probably one of the most avoided types of bugs aside from spiders. I wanted to highlight them as something to be feared with sharp, exaggerated, triangular stingers. Triangles are highlighted in their wings and arms and even though I wanted to keep a more rounded body, they are pointed to contrast the rounded and softer nature of the bees. For some of my insect illustrations, I wanted to make people rethink their presumptions, for the wasps, I wanted to dig into them. The teacup on the grass was my second idea for an environment, but I felt it led into the elegance I was building. Like a country club or high glass area, it could be seen as arrogant.



Figure 9: Wasps - Environment



Figure 10: Wasps - Shape

Bees

The bees illustrated my want to change viewer perspective through shape.

My brother avoids bees just as intensely as he does wasps (or any other bug), but bees do not sting. When I see them in nature, I see fat little pollinators who like to buzz right next to my ear. In my pieces, I wanted to show them as cute and round. To correlate to shape, I wanted to lean into the common correlation with circles to represent freedom and grace, harmony, and protection. I wanted them to be warm and comfortable. They are, in a sense, eternal. The flower field encompassed everything I wanted to show for them. The purples were a nice partner for them and the depth build on the eternity of their care for me.

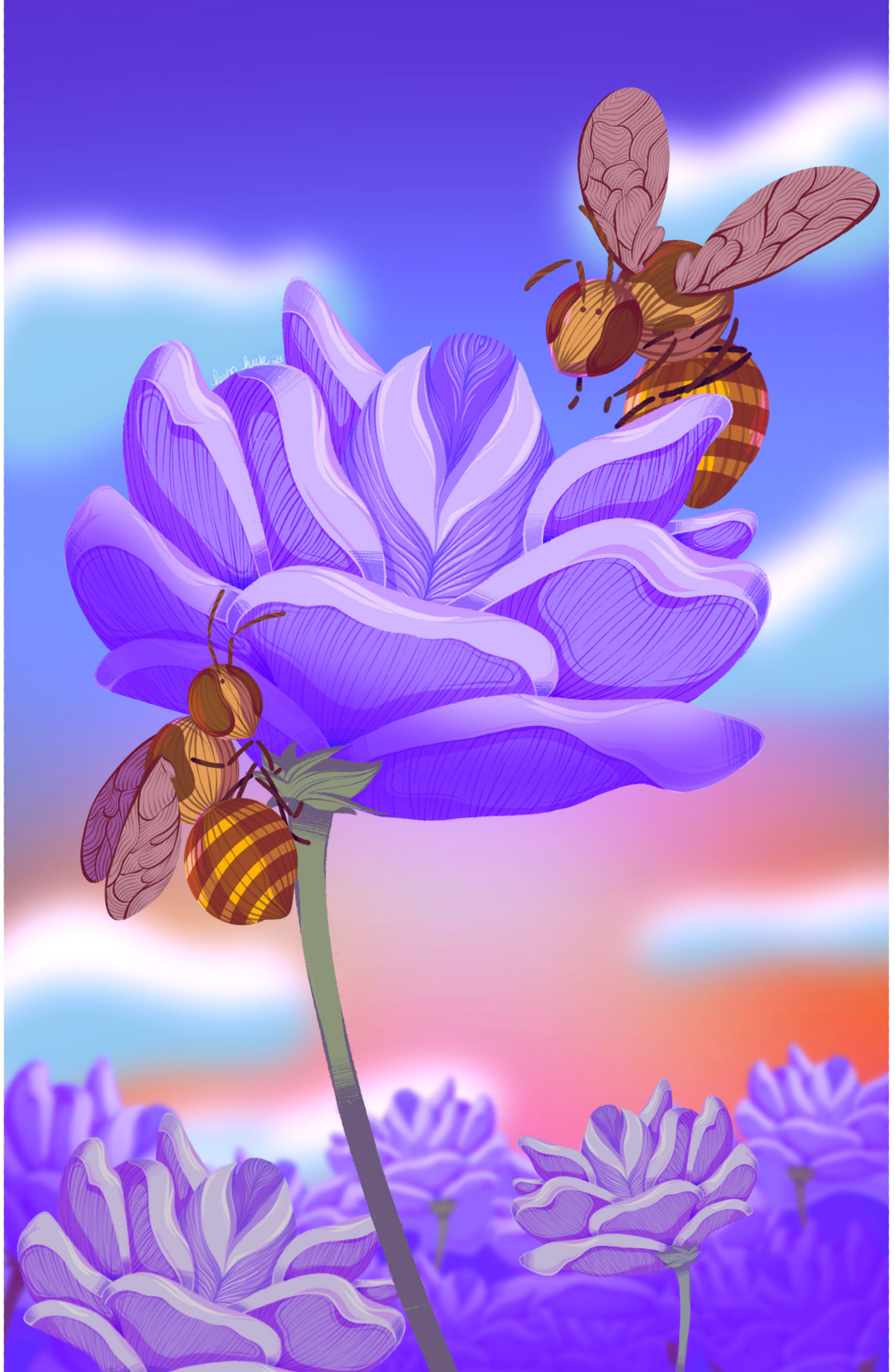


Figure 11: Bees - Environment

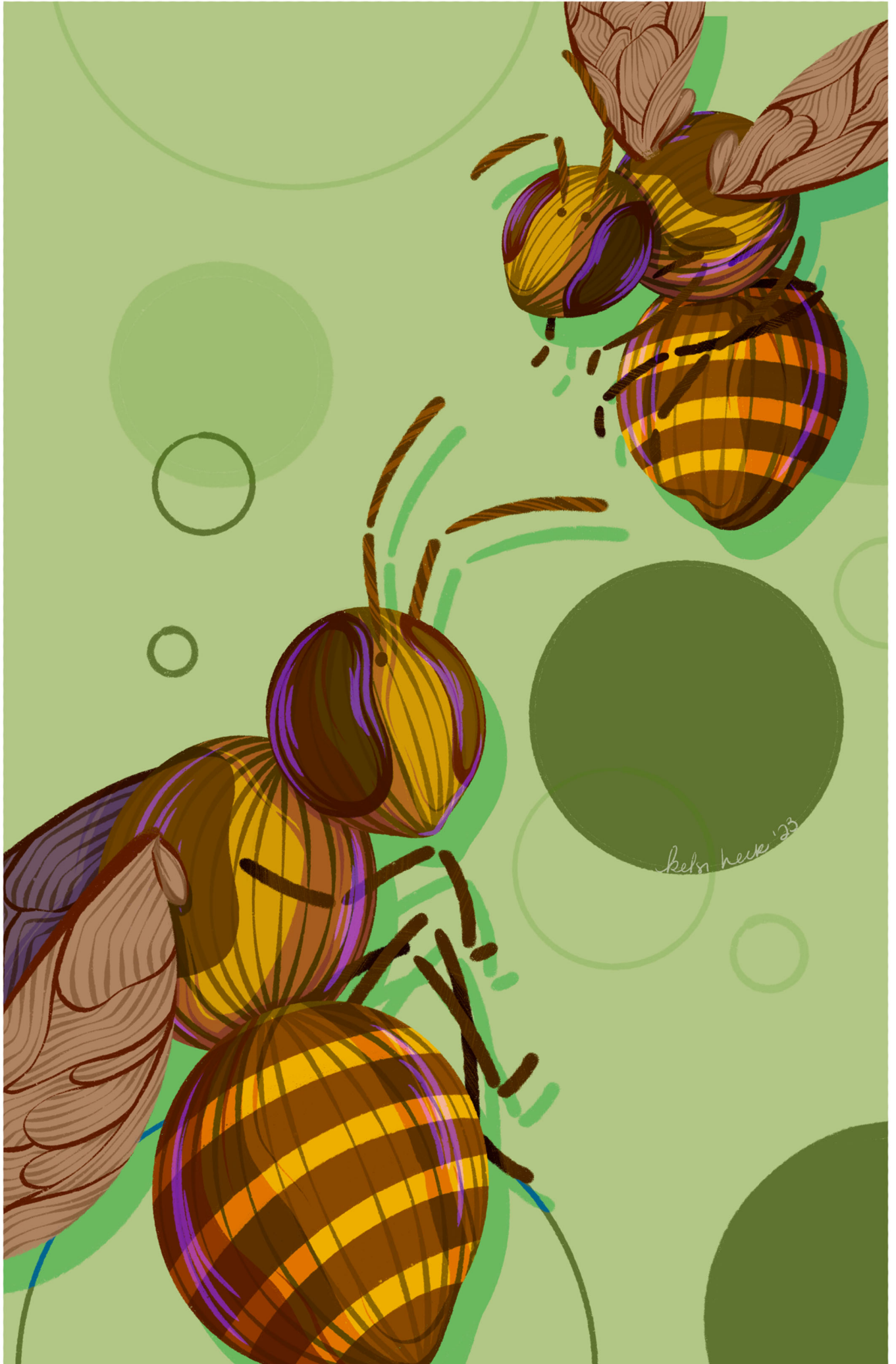


Figure 12: Bees - Shape

Cicadas

The cicadas were more of a struggle for me. They are less seen than heard, and when I did look them up for research, I was already put off by their appearance. It was like learning how I viewed them and how to see them differently at the same time. Their bodies had such an enchanting iridescent color while their bodies were nothing like what I pictured from the skins seen on trees after they shed. I wanted to highlight the blocky-ness of their body and the beauty of their wings. The sound heard on summer nights is not made by their wings, but by the clicking of a circular membrane on a cicadas first abdomen segment that bends when contracted. I show these membranes exaggerated in the yellow circles on the top part of the body and focus the other shape building on the trapezoid-like body. My focus was more rectangular in nature, but the natural shape is a trapezoid and pulls identifiers like rationality and peace. I wanted to highlight stability and comfort, bringing in circles in the eyes and head, and felt it was easy to make people reconsider their preconceived notions, as cicadas are rarely observed. I chose to place them in the woods as I remember them most as the lullaby at my mother's house, playing in the woods behind her house.



Figure 13: Cicadas - Environment

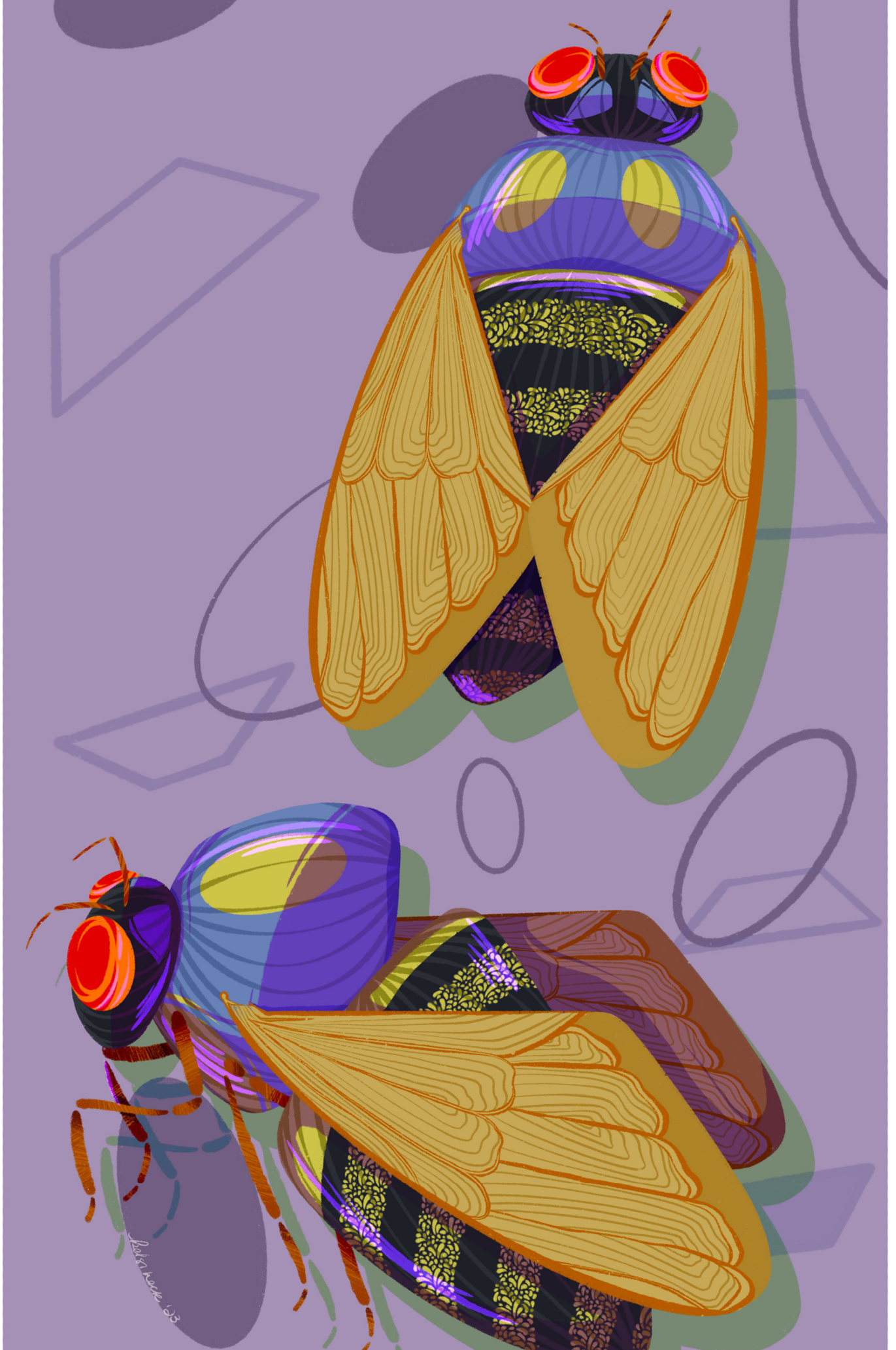


Figure 14: Cicadas - Shape

Moths

The moths were probably my favorite pieces to complete. I used to collect moths and moth carcasses, finding them outside on lights at my grandparents and then on the steps of my mother's apartment. I fought with how to draw them, the best way to show them how I loved them, what I wanted to say about them. The previous pieces had been so focused on definitive pieces that I hadn't branched out into the irregular. These moths are still based in a rounded and circular area of focus, but I allowed myself to branch into spiral category, known to encompass feelings of creativity, natural growth, and cycles of time or seasons. The life of a moth is short but beautiful and so dependent on these ideas. Spirals correlate to transformation and trust during change. A moth's brain and body are completely liquified in the cocoon to be reconstructed into the beautiful flying creatures we see at night. I chose a lantern for their environment half for the presumption of moths being drawn to light, but further to really show the detail in their wings. With a more earthy color pallet, the stark light of the lantern made the moths a nice resting place, showing how I see them.



Figure 15: Moths - Environment



Figure 16: Moths - Shapes

Flies

The flies were the final addition and fostered a focus on disgust. Flies are annoying and spit on their food to liquify it. Their bodies are also intricate and quite interesting. When I set out for research and sketching, I had already decided I was going to show spit and decay and all the disgust I had harbored. However, just as I wanted to change perceptions for viewers, I was changing my own perceptions. The body of a fly is so colorful and looking past the more disgusting parts of its lifestyle, it was such an interesting insect to draw. I wanted to show the many sections that made up its body and the large, segmented eyes associated with it. I still included the spit. The body focused on rounded and triangular shapes, as I wanted to bring out the energy and freedom of a fly and the tension and direction I observed.



Figure 17: Flies - Environment

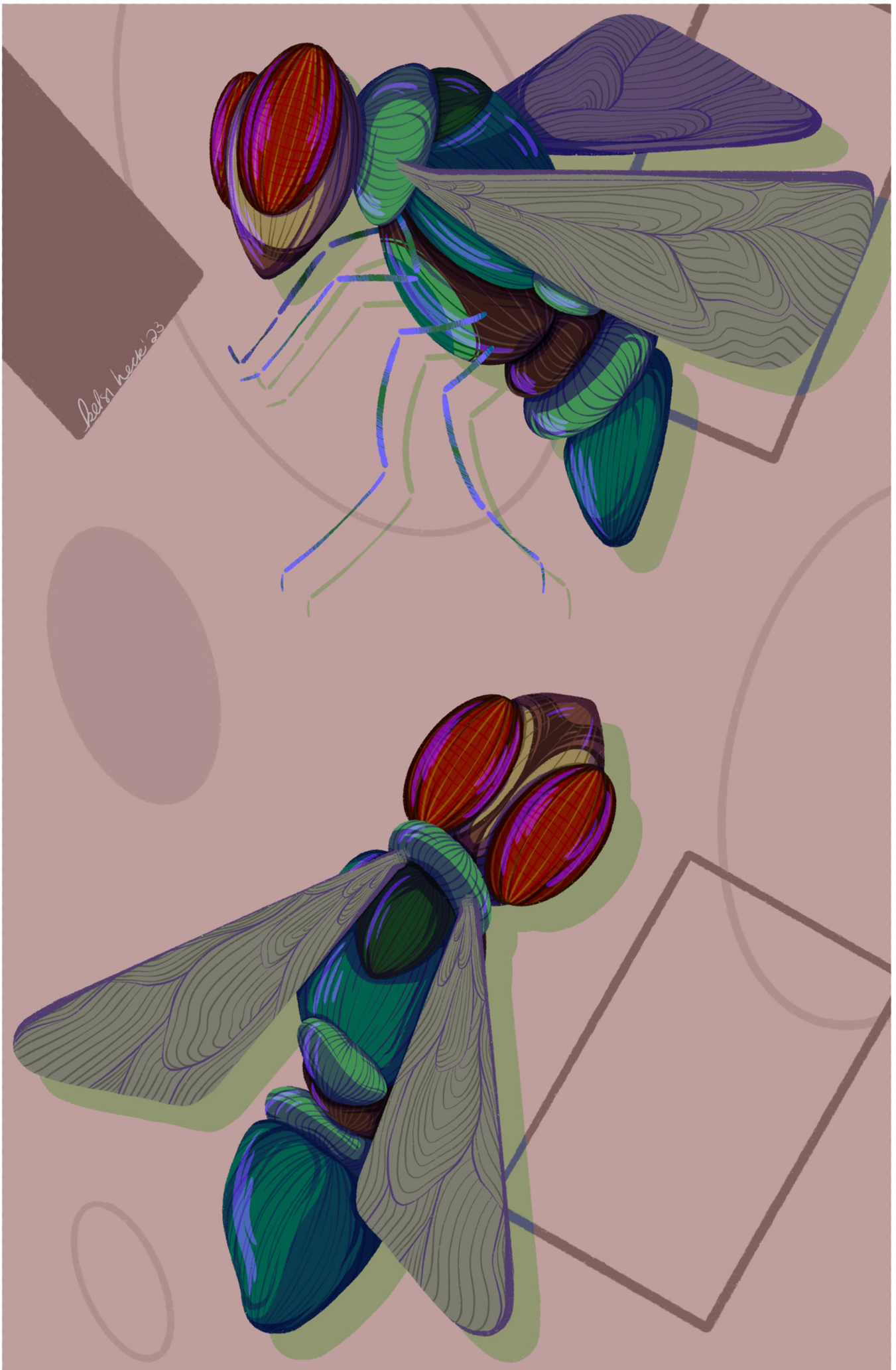


Figure 18: Flies - Shapes

Exhibition: What Do You See

I had hoped to showcase my pieces in a gallery even after changing the subject matter. It didn't work out, so I instead chose to use the great wide web. I created an Instagram page titled "The Narrative of Shapes in Art" where I posted all ten pieces in stacks, or posted together, of two based on the insects. Below each post was the following description:

My creative thesis aims to investigate how shapes psychologically impact viewer interpretation of narrative art. The illustrations focus on using shapes to portray different insects in a stylistic interpretation and anecdotal qualities rather than just literal anatomical subject matter. These illustrations emphasize the importance of shape-building as an integral part of unification, personality, and the communication of character to an audience.

The link in my bio will direct you to a survey answering the following questions to satisfy audience response and help me complete my thesis. It does not require an email and should only take around 10 minutes per illustration, depending on how many surveys you choose to complete. I have included the questions in the comments to help you think while you observe.

Thank you again for taking the time to participate!

I then linked the survey in the Instagram page bio and included a post with a QR code they could save to take them to the survey. Posting my pieces online allowed me the ability to reach more people outside of just college and art students and collect data in one place. The survey asked the following questions:

What insect are you answering this survey for? (This allowed me to sort the answers after the fact.)

Was shape used effectively in this piece to portray a personality for this insect?

Below are possible attributes associated with shapes psychologically. Please select those you feel align with this insect/how this insect was portrayed or include some of your own along the same train of thought. (This included checkboxes with adjectives similar to those I used above.)

Did the way this insect was illustrated and the shape-based focus on its rendering reinforce or make you rethink the way you view this insect? Please explain in the space provided below.

I wanted to get a clear and direct response to see how others were interacting with my pieces. The survey was anonymous and participants were allowed to take it multiple times to give accurate responses to individual insects. While I had the fun and reflection I experienced during the process, I wanted to see how others reacted. My goal for the process was to show others how shape actually affected how they perceived different characters in shows and drawn media.

Responses

As of writing this, the Instagram page and the survey are still online and available for anyone who is interested in a study like this. The summation of responses here cover a week, 31 total surveys returned, and the feedback I received made me feel that all of my research and planning was worth it. The response was overly positive and people were very vocal with how my art had inspired their perceptions either with new appreciation or changing their thoughts on the insects all together.

The most selected attributes for the bees were *graceful, warm, strong, and harmonious*. It was half-and-half for if their preconceived ideas had been reinforced or changed, one respondent commenting:

I think bees are misunderstood and people just want to kill them but they help us in so many ways.

I had hoped to illicit a character of grace, harmony and protection with the bee's illustrations and make people rethink our courageous pollinators, so these results were the first success of my project.

The wasps had a more interesting collection of feedback. With three reviews, two had reported rethinking their preconceived notions of wasps. I had hoped to dig deep into the character of danger and arrogance for the wasps, establishing them as strong and aggressive, which were reflected in the responses. However, many people commented they saw *grace* and *transformative* character in the wasps, one response stating:

This illustration also helped me see both a different point of view and helped reinforce my idea of wasps. While they are dangerous and highly aggressive, they also live harmoniously and work together to take care of each other. It is very interesting to see another side to this kind of insect, given how they are known for being so aggressive, it is refreshing to see them in a different and more positive light.

The environment had added an element of teamwork and harmony I had not consciously intended, and it created an army-like story for my two wasps. I had reinforced the idea of aggression and power while adding a layer of appreciation just like with the bees.

The moths created an aura of grace and comfort for my viewers, its survey results hanging onto words like *warm, graceful, elegant, and healing*. It received six total reviews, five being in favor of it reinforcing prior appreciations of moths. My success with this piece, a desire to bring out the calming and whimsical nature of a moth that I so admired, was cemented when I received the comment:

Yes, the way the moths were portrayed came off as warm and fuzzy, yet elegant and graceful. The use of the lanterns helped to give a warm feeling, while the shades of green contributed to an elegant feel.

The cicadas received the least amount of feedback, taking up only three of the twenty-nine surveys, but their responses were just as enlightening. My position with the cicadas was to make people think about the insect they hear more than see. Whether this

had been a new perception or reinforcing the old, I just wanted to highlight a southern familiarity everyone could relate to knowing on a warm summer night. The audience determined these insects were portrayed *warm, strong, and comfortable*. Of the three people who reviewed, two responded that they rethought their previous opinions. This insect received one of the most beautiful responses.

The way this insect was illustrated definitely reinforces the way I view this insect. Naturally in the South, cicadas are loved for their association with the summertime. Seeing the extreme attention to detail to their shapes, colors, and patterns is so intriguing and beautiful. It portrays to me how mellow and interesting they are.

I love how the piece came out and seeing that it was able to connect with this person this way was a huge success for me.

Finally, the *comfortable, harmonious, and transformative* flies. The responses were surprising. However, this piece had been a learning experience from the beginning so I felt it fit. Four out of six reviews claimed they thought of flies differently now, my favorite comment being:

Yes. I've never looked at a fly through shapes before.

The included comment attributed the words *graceful, strong, and flexible* to the fly illustrations, and I appreciated their honesty.

After looking at all of the survey results and the comments I received from friends and family complimenting my work and inquiring more into my studies, I felt amazing. This project was the largest I had ever had the pleasure of working on and I'm so glad I was able to. I'm glad I didn't try to stay with an idea I wasn't passionate about and changed focus so that I was able to present something I was completely and truly proud of.

CONCLUSION

Through all the changes and alterations this thesis experienced, my goal stayed to create a series of illustrations that would educate and inspire thought regarding shape building in character design. I presented my art online to reach a broader audience and therefore gain responses from people of different experiences and backgrounds. I sought to create an experience that would stay with people and influence the way they absorbed media in their everyday life. My personal experience with this project was one of technical trial and an understanding of how I will carry my artistic business endeavors far into the future. It sparked new inspirations and reignited a passion I had been losing throughout my college career. By posting this as an online exhibit, I have a permanent place of comfort and reflection as I move into life after college. I feel fulfilled in this project by what it taught me, and even more so by the responses I received and being able to see how my art effected audience perceptions of these creatures.

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