



Miguel A. Aragón: Holding It All Gently

Cover:
Miguel A. Aragón, *26.06.2009, 20:07:31, 2022*, color lithograph, 27 1/2 x 22 in., edition of 12

Miguel A. Aragón: Holding It All Gently

February 13 - March 14, 2024

Opening Reception
Thursday, February 15, 4:30pm—6:30pm

Curated by Cynthia Chris and Siona Wilson

Gallery Hours:
Monday—Thursday
Noon—4:00pm

The Art Gallery at the College of Staten Island
The City University of New York
Center for the Arts, Building 1P, Room 112
2800 Victory Boulevard
Staten Island, NY 10314

<https://www.csi.cuny.edu/campus-life/csi-buildings/art-gallery-csi>



Introduction

For as long as I can remember, Herlinda Sifuentes de Aragón, my mother, would keep her hands busy creating. She would cook, bake, knit, crochet, and sew among many other activities. She would do this out of necessity to care for her family, but also as a means to enjoy her free time. She was a creator of love.

As a kid, I would wear many of her creations, sweaters, socks, etc. I also slept many cold nights warmed up by blankets she had knitted, and as teenager I would ask her to sew rock and metal band patches to my beloved denim jacket. During her lifetime, she tried her hand at various crafts, but nothing captured her attention as much as knitting and crochet did. For many years, she would create a large number of scarfs, blankets and baby outfits, which she would then donate to the *Hospital de la Mujer (Hospital for Women)* in Juárez, México.

After she passed away on March 15, 2019, I traveled several times to her home in Juárez; these trips became a research platform where I re-lived moments I had spent with her, as well as sort through and document memories that have been imprinted on physical items like the elephant ceramic figurines she collected, and objects she created with her hands.

The body of work included on this publication is created as a direct conversation between us. My intention is to create artwork from a personal narrative while attempting a universal understanding of mortality and cultural experiences.

I would like to thank everyone at the following organizations for providing access to their facilities, their guidance, and above all, their unconditional support: Flatbed Center for Contemporary Printmaking, Austin, TX; KALA Art Institute, Berkeley, CA; The Morgan Conservatory, Cleveland, OH; Slugfest Printmaking Workshop & Gallery, Austin, TX; Lake Effect Editions, Syracuse, NY; and La Scuola Internazionale di Grafica Venezia, Italy.

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Miguel A. Aragón

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

By Kathleen M. Cumiskey

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Psalms 139:13-16 NIV)

The loss of a parent is intensely personal yet universally felt – a shared milestone one expects to encounter in a lifetime. As I write, my own mother has just died, and it is through the lens of this experience that I encounter Miguel Aragón's exploration of the intricate landscape of losing his own mother. The body of work featured in the exhibition morphs between a post-mortem examination, and an elusive, metaphysical, bittersweet, hauntingly beautiful space between the past, present, and the future that is created by death. Aragón presents an enigmatic tapestry woven with whispers of sorrow. The work of his mother's hands—through the integration of prints of her beautiful crochet lacework – serves as an unveiling of emotions that hints at the multidimensional nature of grief. Aragón's intention is not to build an altar or memorial to his mother but rather to bring the viewer into a deeper understanding of the reality of death and what grief requires to knit ourselves back together.

Death spins you in all directions, reshaping and undoing who you have understood yourself to be, leading to upheaval and disruption in one's sense of identity. This can be a disorienting state where the familiar aspects of oneself seem to unravel and fall apart. Grief can feel pathological, characterized by disordered thinking and behavior, yet these manifestations are seen as natural and therefore not requiring professional treatment. This non-pathological disordering of the psyche allows for a period of transition to occur as we move from the denial of the loss toward an enduring connection with objects once belonging to our deceased loved one that help us integrate the loss into our present reality.

Aragón's direct confrontation with the death of his mother strikes a parallel to Ron Mueck's *Dead Dad* (1996). This life-like sculpture of his father's naked corpse is rendered in intricate exactness from memory but scaled down to the size of a child. The sculpture is placed on a low platform so that the viewer looms large above the diminutive creation. The largeness of life takes over in the presence of death since the vulnerability of a dead parent can leave a child (no matter the chronological age)

feeling both powerful and powerless at the same time. In a similar vein, Aragón's utilization of prints of his mother's handiwork mirrors her circulatory system and understood metaphorically it suggests her powerful ongoing life force. By integrating her artistic creations into his work, Aragón elevates her from subject to collaborator—revealing the heart behind the artistry that both nourished her craft practice and contributed to her eventual decline. She died of heart failure. The delicateness of the pieces and the careful consideration of how they are utilized further highlights the notion of powerlessness inherent in the face of the inevitability of death, destruction, and decay. This vulnerability reflects every child's inability (yet fantastical desire) to prevent the natural course of life, particularly in the context of a parent's mortality

Transitional Objects and the Continuation of Bonds

It is assumed here that the task of reality acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by *an intermediate area of experience . . .* which is not challenged.¹

There are many rituals of continuity—personal practices and ceremonies—that individuals engage in to sustain a connection with loved ones who have passed away. These rituals serve as a means of affirming the ongoing bond with the deceased and nurturing the sense of an enduring relationship, even after their physical presence is gone.

The presence of the dead in daily life comes through memories and daily reminders, including encounters with objects that belonged to the deceased. Through “transitional objects” and the continuation of bonds, attachment to the deceased endures as the grieving process evolves. The concept of transitional objects, as defined in psychoanalytic literature, refers to items that serve as intermediaries, facilitating a connection between an individual's present reality and what has been lost or gone away. These objects provide a sense of comfort or continuity, allowing the holder to feel a connection with the past and with what is absent. Through these objects, individuals maintain a symbolic link to what has been lost, creating a bridge between the past and the present.

The sociologist Christine Valentine highlights the significance of experiences of touching and sharing affective material in perpetuating these emotional bonds.² In essence, rituals of continuity, supported by transitional objects and emotional exchanges, enable individuals to sustain a sense of connection and attachment to the dead as we go on living.

¹ Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1971), 17.

² Christine Valentine, “Identity and Post-Mortem Relationships in the Narratives of British and Japanese Mourners,” *Sociological Review* 61(2), 2013: 318-401.

This intermediary experience, fostered by transitional objects, blurs the boundaries between what is real and unreal. It creates a space where the suspension of disbelief becomes significant – a crucial aspect not only in the artistic process but also deeply intertwined with the process of grieving. Accepting the reality of loss challenges our long-held beliefs about what is real and our own sense of identity. Transitional objects aid us in grasping onto remnants of the past as we navigate the evolving present.

In Aragón's work, this concept of transitional objects is intricately woven into his practice. His work is guided by the hand of his mother through the presence of her crocheted work. These pieces serve as more than mere representations; they embody the essence of his mother's presence. Through the manipulation of light and the artistry of printmaking, Aragón skillfully crafts a ghostly representation – an evocative and ethereal portrayal that transcends the physicality of the objects themselves. This transformation imbues his art with a narrative that encapsulates the experience of transitioning between the past and the present, while maintaining an affective bond to what was lost. At the same time, the work provides multiple entry points into a shared grieving process.

Integration of Death as Creation

Aragón's work boldly proclaims death as an act of creation. The depiction of death transcends the conventional notion of an endpoint; instead, it becomes a transformative beginning. The intertwining of the deep reverence given to death generates a parallel reverence for the divine act of creation. The sacredness and intricacy of life's patterns are unveiled through the imagery encapsulated in Aragón's mother's lacework. This delicate and precise craftsmanship not only portrays the beauty of the artistry but also serves as a symbolic representation of the sacred geometry underlying life itself. The imagery evokes the intimate connection between mother and son as he was once "knit together in [his] mother's womb." This mother/son collaboration is an unbounded connection—an intertwining of their essences that transcends the physical boundaries of life and death. Each intricately crafted piece, "fearfully and wonderfully made" in that secret place from which we all have emerged to which we will all return.

As I begin to walk my own path into the loss of my mother, Aragón's work elevates death beyond finality, portraying it as a transformative journey—a cyclical pattern of creation and return. It celebrates the interconnectedness between life, death, and the profound artistry of what is left behind, inviting viewers to contemplate the sacredness and beauty woven into the fabric of life and death alike.

The Shape of a Life

by Yael Friedman

What happens when artists whose work centers on death experience grief themselves? In 2015, the musician Nick Cave lost his son Arthur, aged 15, in a tragic accident. Prior to his son's death, Cave's body of work was defined by its playful and dramatic explorations of the most dark and morbid corners of the human experience. Death was everywhere and it was vivid, sneering, dramatic, often operatic. And for many of us it's been bloody entertaining. One entire album is devoted to murder ("The Murder Ballads") and so many songs square off with God and the devil and myriad characters that could populate an entire phantasmagoric world. I wondered, as many of Cave's other fans surely did, what this artist, who traded in death, would do now that the worst kind of horror was visited upon him. After Arthur passed, I could not fathom seeing Nick Cave on stage, sitting at the piano, in his black suit and even darker jet-black hair, crooning catchy melodies about maidens and madmen. What would this most profound grief do to him? What happens to those who focus their imagination on the worst when it is still abstract to them personally? There is an enormous difference between aestheticizing death and grief when it is your own as opposed to someone else's or when it is woven from the real and imagined, as in the case of Cave.

I thought a lot about these questions when looking at the new body of work by Miguel Aragón. For many years, beginning around 2009, Aragón's work focused on death, and his name was synonymous with his prints of corpses – portraits of cadavers that were the human debris and devastation of the drug wars in Mexico. Aragón is from Ciudad Juárez, where the violence was among the most brutal in an exceedingly sad and grisly escalation that exploded in 2006. Even more than the generation of artists preceding him (such as Teresa Margolles, a founding member of the SEMEFO collective, which took its name from Mexico City's central morgue), Aragón's work engages with the death of the drug wars more directly, concretely, damningly. In a series titled *Retratos de Pérdida por el Narcotráfico* (*Portraits of Loss Due to Drug Trafficking*), he used enlarged images of both innocent bystanders and cartel members. At the time, he stated, "I concentrated on the use of processes that are reductive in nature ... It is my intention to transform the image, through erasure, from crude and unbearable into a more beguiling or subtle form for presenting such disturbing images; the void thus becomes a space nurturing memory of what was there before engaging the viewer into a more lasting experience with this difficult subject matter."¹

¹ Interview with the author, January 12, 2014.

In this way, Aragón's engagement with death and violence was already more personal than that of Nick Cave. It was part of Aragón's cultural heritage and lived reality—the images streaming before him and through his consciousness on a daily basis, the life of his city and its people fractured and contorted by it. Furthermore, familiarity with death, and reverence for the dead, has had a long tradition in Mexico, figuring prominently in its art and culture. One can trace imagery of death as far back as the Mesoamericans and see it featured in the murals of José Clemente Orozco and the prints and illustrations of José Guadalupe Posada, in the rituals and celebrations of the Day of the Dead and in the frequent offerings to Santa Muerte. As the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz has written, “By the time intimacy with death was taken up as a peculiarly Mexican sign, a densely layered repertoire of death ritual and death vocabularies had already developed. This reality presented itself to a generation of nation builders like an elaborate birthday cake, ready to serve.”²

And yet, like Nick Cave, Aragón's dead subjects were not emanations of his own personal grief. Much in the way that Cave has built countless stories through song about the dead, the dying, the killers and the killed, Aragón has provided a direct mediation of the story of the drug wars through its victims. Using pictures taken from newspapers and television, ones familiar to most Mexicans and much of the rest of the world, Aragón rescued the images from their 2-dimensional sensational horror. He personalized them and imbued them with a dignity they lost in the death parade of media coverage. There is a clear narrative intent for both of these men in the art they have crafted, to either entertain, as in the case of Cave, or distilling the immediacy of a tragedy, as Aragón has done. While also “entertaining,” Aragón's art is never exploitative, although it is often beautiful.

While Aragón has produced more work since *Retratos de Pérdida por el Narcotráfico*, a narrative impulse has remained, an attempt to make ongoing issues more immediate and less remote, such as when they are part of the news cycle's litany of tragedies. This includes Aragón's *Seguridad en el Hogar (Home Security)* series, with images showing how the built environment in Ciudad Juárez has adapted to the drug wars, with “Residents [having] fled indoors in fear, hiding behind newly constructed walls and gates, and thousands of businesses have closed in their wake. Foot traffic is all but nonexistent, leaving a chilling residue of absence in city streets.”³ And in taking on the death toll of Covid, Aragón's September 2020 series *The Human Toll—COVID-19*, the artist marked the 100,000th death from the virus with images from newspapers listing the dead, and images of the ubiquitous masks as symbols of the dead. The work suggests our adaptation to a fundamentally changed reality, and the need to take stock of any passive complicity in accepting the unacceptable. It is possible that the gulf between an artist's creations and his own lived experience is wide enough to afford these narrative arcs when it comes to death. The actual shattering of time and space that grief exacts is usually beyond mere imagination.

² Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 58.

³ Miguel Aragón, “Artist Statement” accessed January 18, 2024: <http://aragonmiguel.com/gallery.seguridad-en-el-hogar>.

All of the above series were societal tragedies suffered by others, without a direct personal intrusion into the artist's own life.

In the beautiful pieces of *Miguel Aragón: Holding It All Gently*, created after Aragón lost his mother, there is a fundamental departure in form, subject matter, and process. While Aragón had already begun to conceive of a collaboration with his mother before she passed, it only came to fruition after. If he and his mother had been able to create together, it would have undoubtedly been more personal than his earlier work, but his grief and mourning would not have been part of the creative process. And while Aragón emphasizes that this show is not a memorial, it is certainly a testimonial, even if it is to their lived relationship. Keeping a loved one alive by engaging with their work and imagining what an actual collaboration might be, lies somewhere between an actual interaction and a preservation of memory.

In *One More Time with Feeling*, the 2016 documentary about Nick Cave that centers on his son's death and the recording of *Skeleton Tree*, the first album that came after, someone off camera asks him, "Obviously your songs have become a lot less narrative." Cave responds, "I wrote stories that seemed to hold everything together, but I don't believe in the narrative anymore...I don't think life is a story." The music is still as melodic as before, but the stories are contained in the individual words or phrases of the lyrics, not the constructs of the songs. They pierce you with feeling first and meaning later.

Similarly, in Aragón's new work, the colors, the shapes, the conceptions, show a striking evolution beyond a clearly outlined communion with death or any specific narrative. Before she died, Aragón's mother was working less, not by choice—she was receiving fewer hours from her employer. As someone who had worked hard her entire life, she started to feel at a loss and Aragón was inspired to start a collaboration with her partly to fill this vacuum and also spend time with her. When she died suddenly of a heart attack, along with the grief of losing her, Aragón grieved the lost chance to work with her. He also came to find that he could no longer look at his previous work in the same way – looking at the images of death he had created was far too difficult, far too personal. It was a body of work now upended by this pain and the lived experience of what befell his mother, what befell him. Aragón explained that in creating his earlier series with the corpses, he was ultimately thinking of his own mortality, along with deep feelings of empathy for the families in Mexico who had suffered so much loss.⁴ And yet the possible death of those he loved did not preoccupy him in quite the same way. He told me that right after his mother died, he didn't know how he was going to continue that other body of work, it was just too difficult. All of a sudden, looking at those bodies was just too hard.⁵

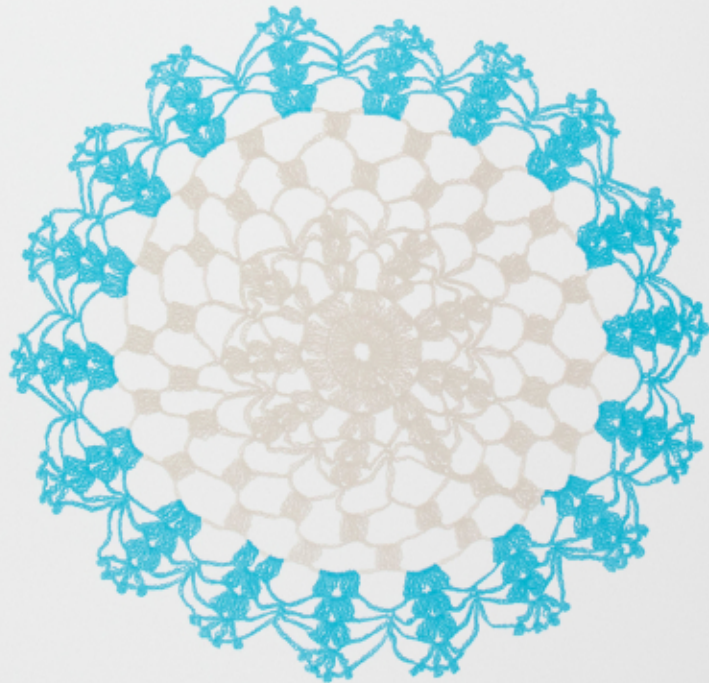
^{4,5} Interview with artist, December 24, 2023.

When Aragón realized he could not continue with that previous work, and was also grieving for his mother, he found the perfect way to develop a new project using the dozens of doilies she crocheted over the years. These new works build on Aragón's original conception of a collaboration with his mother but filtered through grief's shattering of their previous designs and intentions. The cycle of works presented in the show have very clear ideas and themes, but they are both more expressionistic and more abstract. They seem to show a fuller range of experimentation in subject and technique than Aragón's previous work.

Because Aragón wanted a continuation of his mother's living legacy rather than a memorial for it, he set about preserving these objects she labored over. In a series of cyanotypes, lithographs, and handmade paper, we see them in beautiful blues and yellows and reds. Without knowing the original object that they represent; they appear as gorgeous abstract patterns – and yet they also connect on a corporeal level with the other works on display. Aragón acquired his mother's X-rays from her doctor, and overlaid them with red images of her doilies. The labor of her hand, her heart, and her unfinished work all connect in what truly is both a testament to her and a posthumous collaboration. Even beyond the collaboration, her work and her life inspired Aragón's recent time in Venice, which resulted in the other series in this show. Aragón made what transformed into an unexpected pilgrimage to the island of Burano, famed for its needlepoint lace, which bear a striking resemblance to his mother's intricate crocheting. Because it was a fishermen's village, the houses there have always been brightly painted, in order for the returning men to see them. Nearing the island, the colors made Aragón feel a visceral connection to the colorful hues of Mexico, and the surprising presence of cacti only solidified this feeling.

The resulting works, with their bright colors and prints of orbs in intricate patterns, feel like a burst of life. It also feels like the artist has grown significantly, both because of his grief and his need to depart from the confrontations with death and violence in his previous works. These are exciting new dimensions, an entirely new visual language and evolution in technique. Aragón has said that these series and this current exhibit have not been part of his grieving process. However, I do think one can see what might occur when an artist's imagination encounters new frontiers when they are beset by the seismic shifts of grief.

In *One More Time with Feeling*, Cave says about grief, "You change from the known person to an unknown person—the same but the person inside the skin is different. You step outside and the world is the same, but you are not." While Aragón does not feel he has fundamentally changed after his mother's death, his work has. It feels like a new outer skin that is visible to the world rather than an invisible internal reordering. Perhaps it is a sort of X-ray of this new terrain.

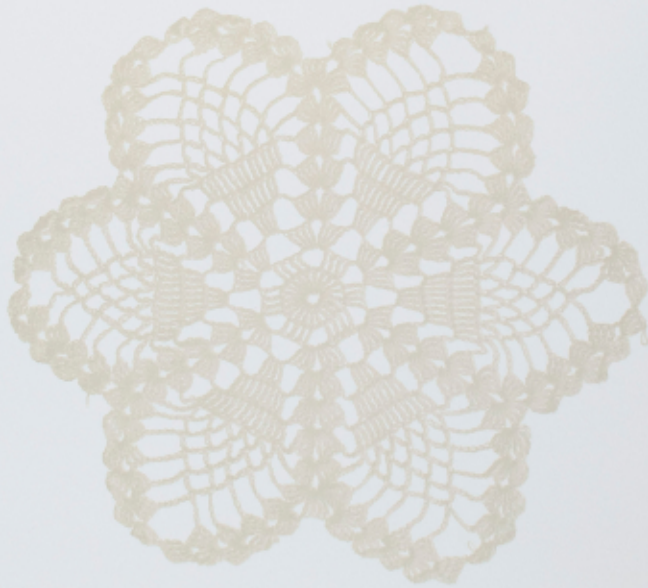


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Maria A. Lopez

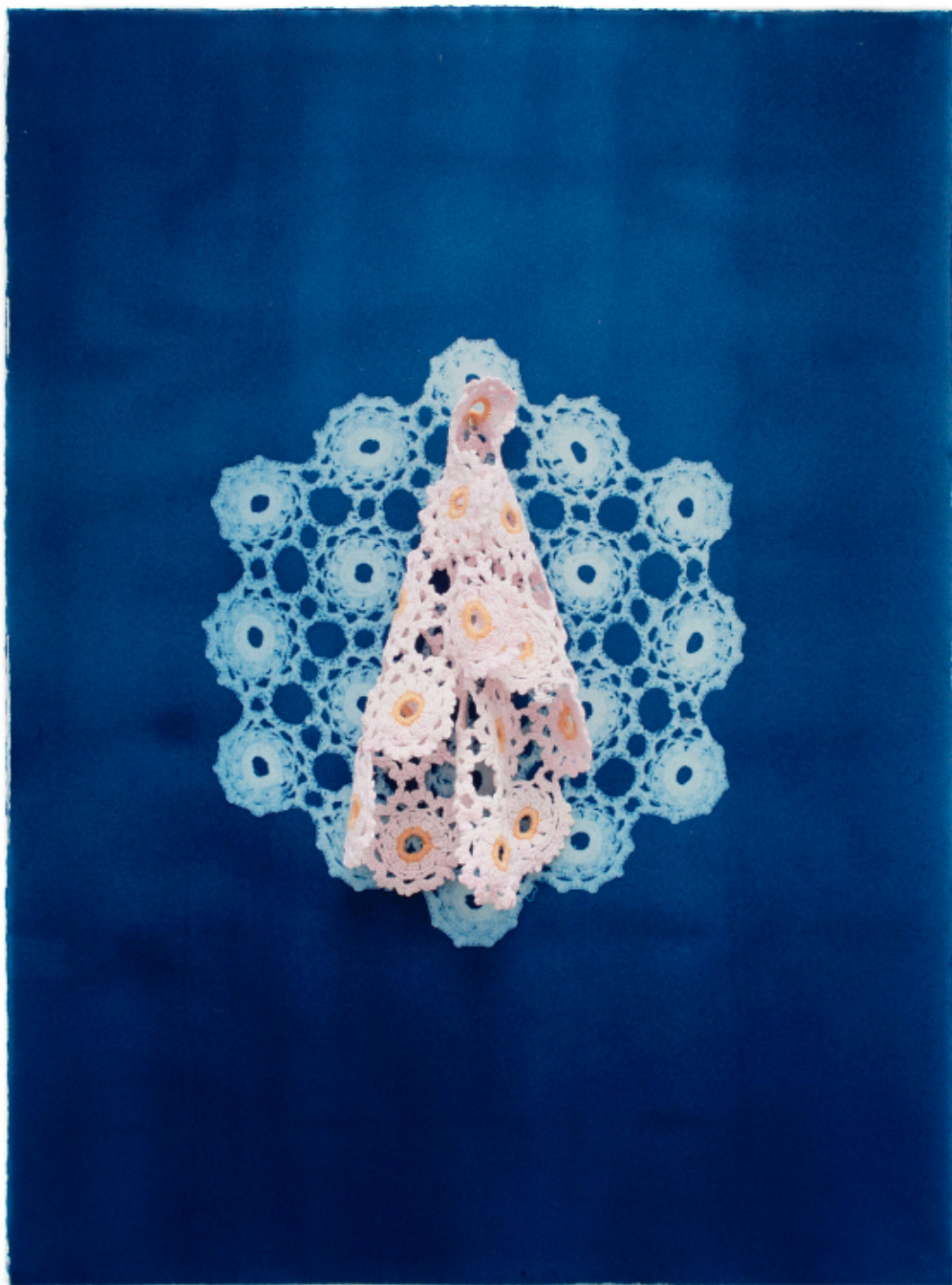




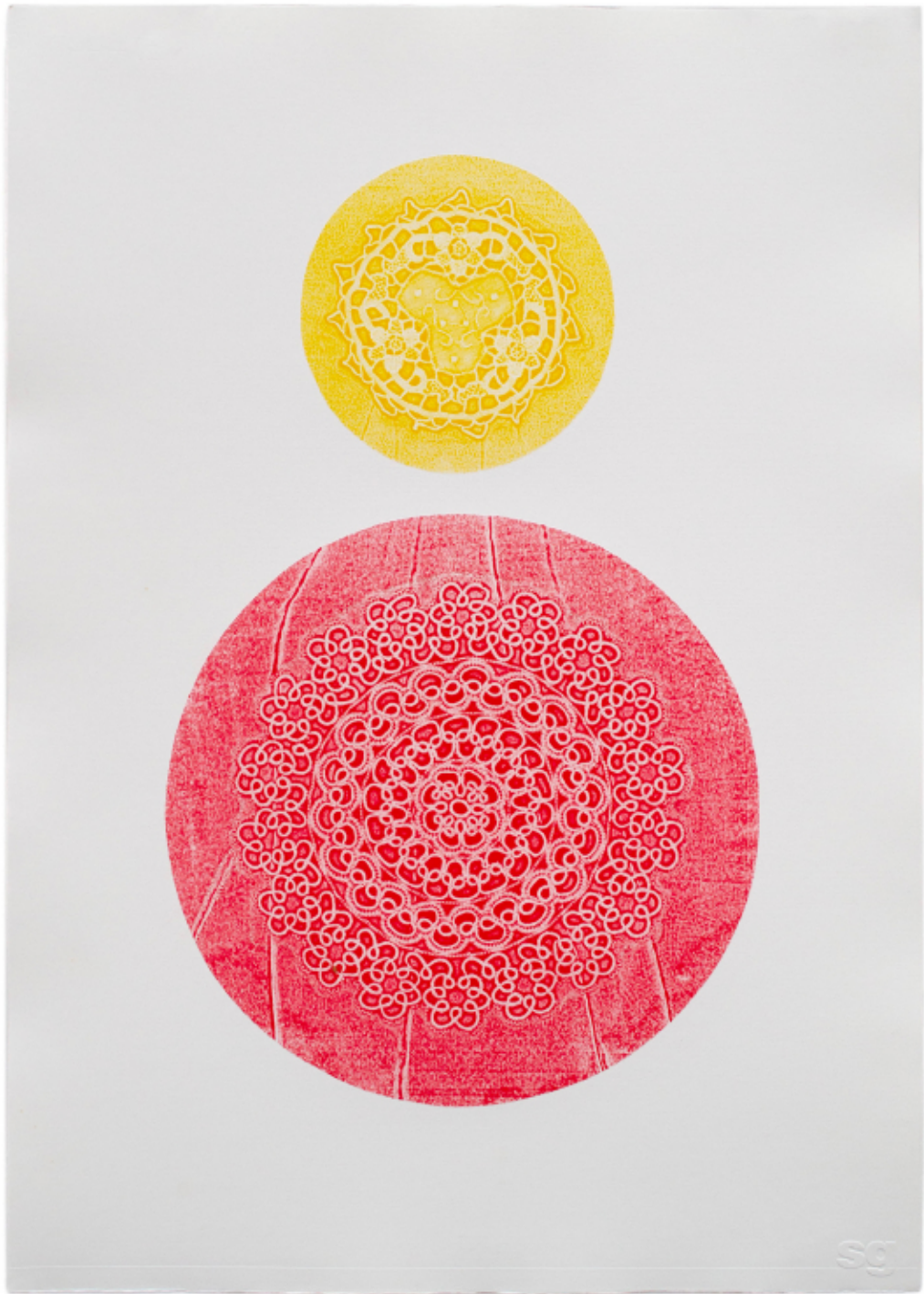
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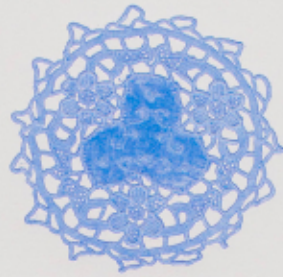
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Miguel A. Hager

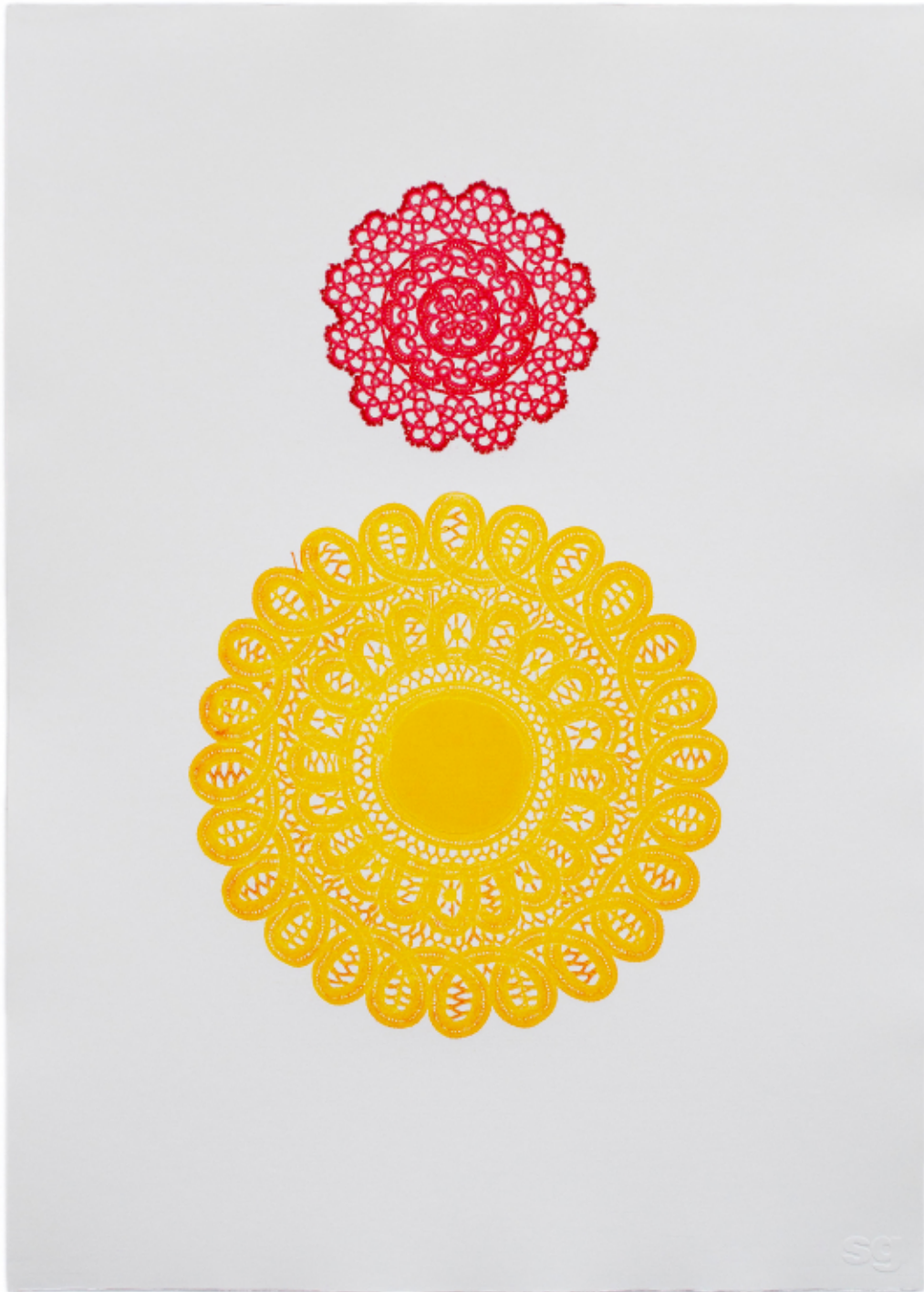


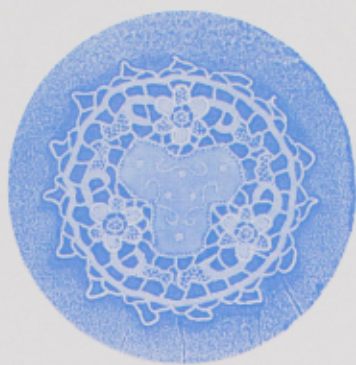




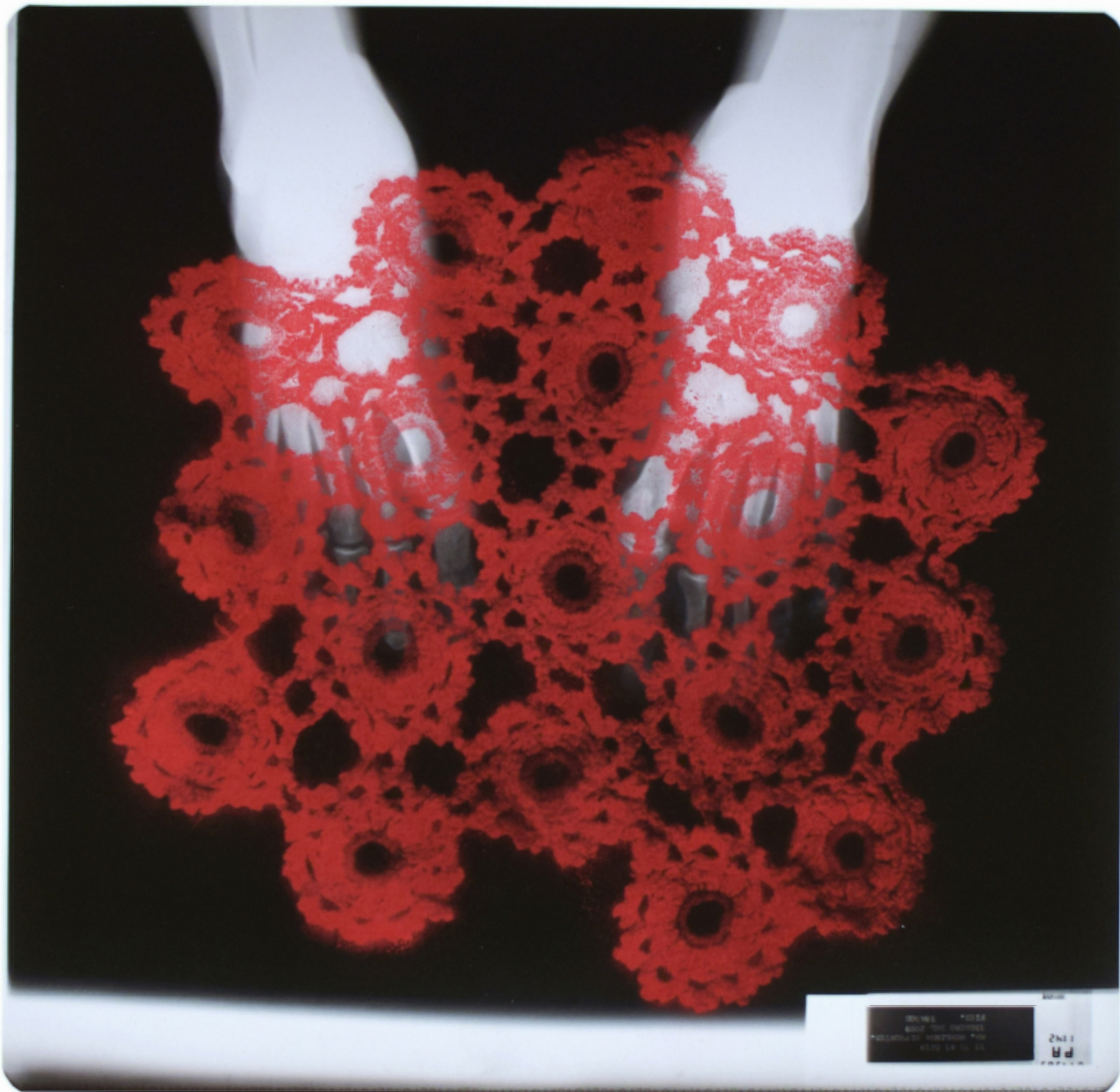


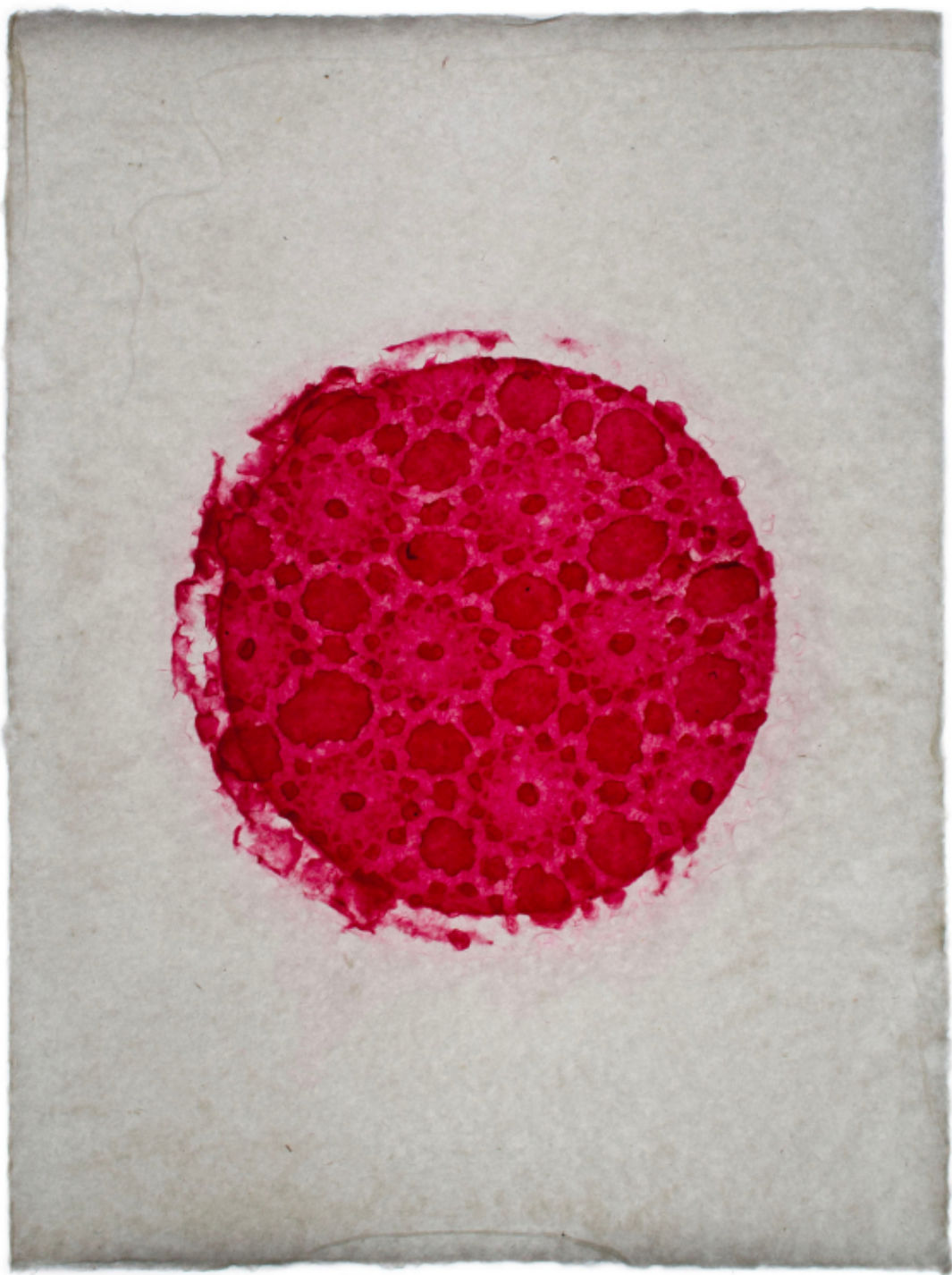
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Miguel A. Aragón was born in Juárez, México. He lives and works in New York City (USA) and Berlin (Germany); he is an Associate Professor in Printmaking, Department of Performing & Creative Arts, College of Staten Island, The City University of New York. Aragón has exhibited internationally at venues including the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Saratoga Springs, NY; Uferhallen, Berlin, and the Society of Northern Alberta Print-Artists, Canada, to name a few. His awards and residences include NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship; KALA Art Institute fellowship and residency, Berkeley, CA; East London Printmakers Keyholder Residency, England; The Scuola Internazionale di Grafica Venezia fellowship, Italy; and Till Richter Museum, Buggenhagen, Germany, among many others. His work is held in collections including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago; and Minneapolis Institute of Art. Aragón's work has been published in *A Survey of Contemporary Printmaking* (Greenville, NC: Wellington B. Gray Gallery, 2012), *Printing the Revolution!: The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020) and more. In 2022, he was nominated for The Queen Sonja Print Award, Oslo; and was awarded the 2022 Southern Graphics Council International Mid-career Printmaker Award.

Rev. Dr. Kathleen (Katie) M. Cumiskey is Professor of Psychology and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the College of Staten Island and The Graduate Center, CUNY. In *Haunting Hands: Mobile Media Practices and Loss* (Oxford University Press, 2017), co-authored with Larissa Hjorth, Cumiskey delves into the intersection of mobile media practices and rituals related to life, death and loss. Dr. Cumiskey has also published on the role of mobile phones in mass shooting events and the broader societal implications of the integration of technology into everyday life and profound human experiences. In her latest work, Dr. Cumiskey explores futurisms and the meaningful connections formed at the intersection of tangible, virtual, augmented, spiritual and "artificially generated" objects. As a founding member of the Public Interest Technology University Network, Dr. Cumiskey is at the forefront of shaping a new interdisciplinary field called Public Interest Technology (PIT), dedicated to intentionally designing technology to serve the public good and to put the power of tech in the hands of the people. An avid knitter and an interfaith minister, Cumiskey has integrated the practice of making shawls and scarfs into grief work with many different groups, from adjudicated juvenile delinquent girls to older women healing from complicated loss. Cumiskey's diverse and impactful contributions span academia, spirituality, technology, and craft, showcasing a multi-dimensional approach to understanding and shaping the evolving landscape of our technologically mediated worlds.

Yael Friedman is a writer based in New York. Her reviews and essays about art, culture, cities, and sports have appeared in *The Economist*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Bloomberg*, *The Forward*, *Haaretz*, *The Daily Beast*, *Urban Omnibus*, *Galaxy Brain*, and elsewhere. Among her most recent publications is an essay for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* on Wim Wenders's new 3D documentary *Anselm*, about the work of the German artist Anselm Kiefer.

IMAGE LIST

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Miguel A. Aragón, *Untitled*, 2023, pressure print, 27 1/2 x 19 1/2 in., unique

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Miguel A. Aragón, *Untitled*, 2023, handmade paper with backlight, 19 1/2 x 25 in., unique

Back cover.

Miguel A. Aragón, *Elefante 09*, 2023, screenprint, 22 1/2 x 30 in., varied edition of 4

Acknowledgments

On behalf of the whole College community, I wish to extend the warmest thanks to Miguel Aragón for this beautiful exhibition. We are honored to have two in-depth reflections on Miguel's work from the independent writer Yael Friedman, and Dr. Katie Cumiskey, Professor of Psychology. I am especially grateful to Professor Cumiskey for her profound and heartfelt comments written in the days following the death of her own mother. The week of the opening will mark the six-year anniversary of my own mother's death and I cannot imagine a better way of reflecting on this milestone in the mourning process through sharing with my colleagues, students, and friends our responses to this beautiful work.

Many thanks to Dr. Catherine Lavender for her ongoing enthusiastic support of the Gallery. The exhibition enjoys the sponsorship of the Bertha Harris Women's Center, the Center for Global Engagement, and the Verrazano Honors Program. I warmly thank our panelists who agreed to lend their time and expertise to events organized in honor of this exhibition: Dr. Catherine Lavender and Mildred Bertre.

I wish to extend my thanks to the students enrolled in ART 305 for their help in making this exhibition happen.

The most heartfelt thanks to my co-curator, Dr. Cynthia Chris. Her good humor, quick intelligence, and empathic sensibility has made this year of curatorial work one of personal growth and joy. Thank you for having my back!

Thanks to Dean Sarolta Takács and Interim Provost Michael Steiper for understanding the vital importance of the arts at the College and for their presence in the Gallery. We are grateful to have an administration that recognizes the Gallery as a vital center for cultural life at our College, a place for laughter, delight, learning, and to have difficult conversations in a caring environment.

Together with the support of colleagues, we are delighted to offer a cultural venue in which students from across all divisions and schools can interact with faculty, staff, and our esteemed college President Timothy Lynch.

Dr. Siona Wilson
Gallery Director
Co-curator
Spring 2024

The CSI Foundation, Inc., seeks philanthropic support for the College of Staten Island: see <https://www.csi.cuny.edu/giving/college-staten-island-foundation-inc>. To give in direct support of the CSI Art Gallery, at Gift Designation, select Other, and write in "Art Gallery."

