

Scott Wolniak

Alight



Charlie Haden's "Closeness" is my favorite record currently. I have listened to it on repeat for four days straight.

Charlie Haden

"CLOSENESS" DUETS WITH
ORNETTE COLEMAN, ALICE COLTRANE,
KEITH JARRETT and PAUL MOTIAN.

CLOSENESS: ONE PART OF THE CREATIVE

process; feeling a closeness to Life; having a need inside to express your feelings in a creative language; dedicating your life to the language we call Jazz (creative music born in the United States); being close to others who have also dedicated their lives to creative music; wanting and hoping to communicate this closeness to as many people as possible through music. These are some of the things this album is about.





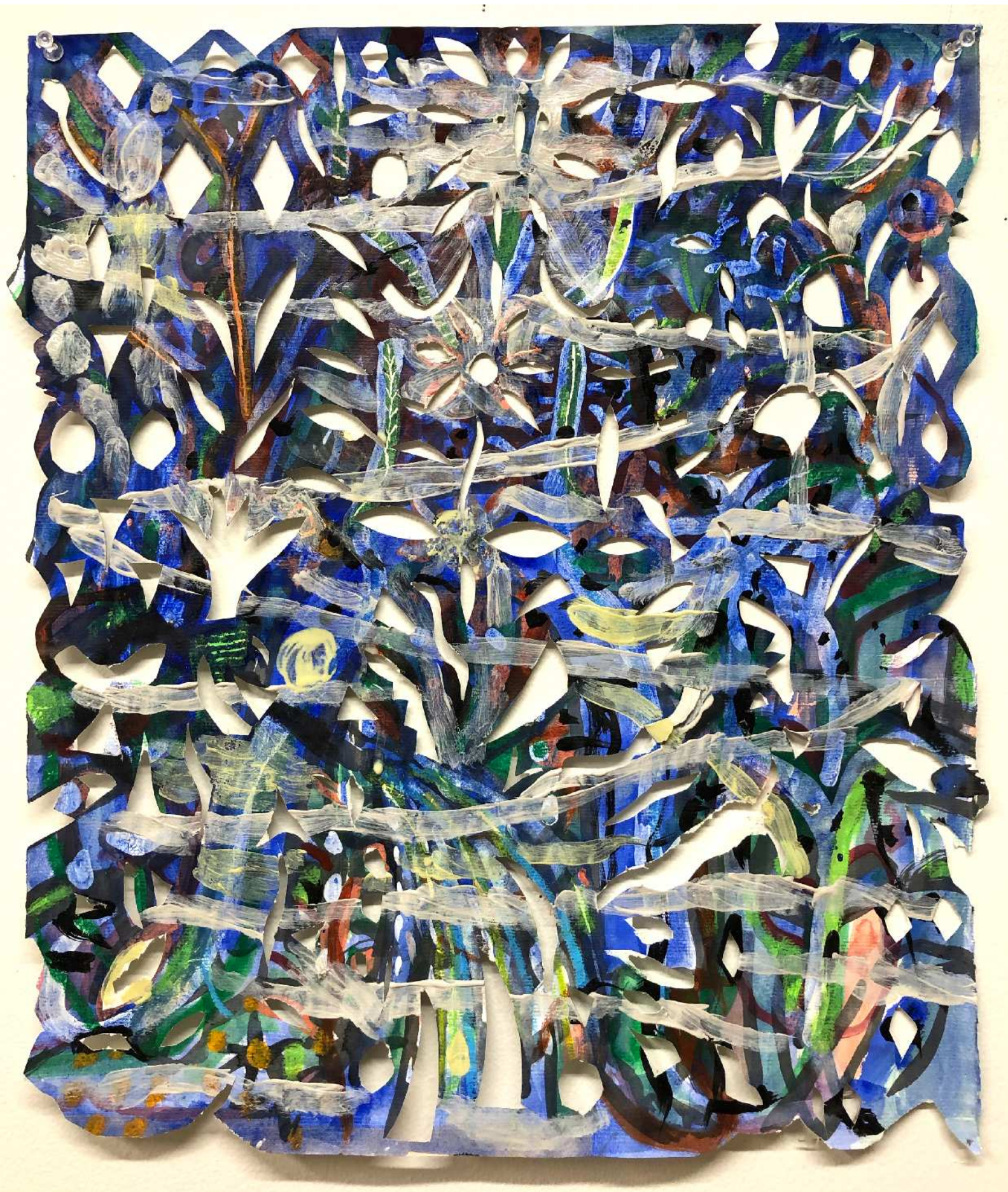


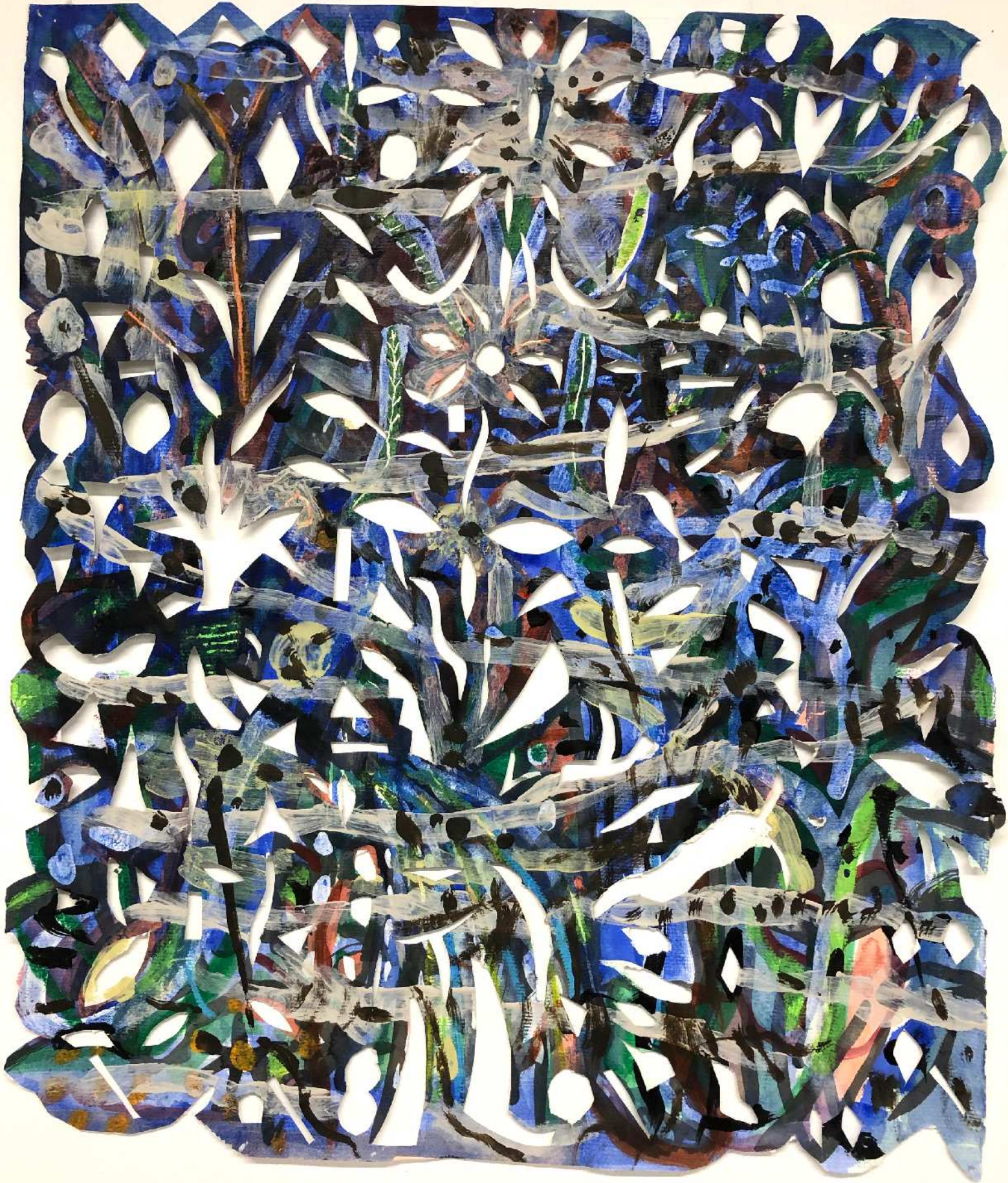












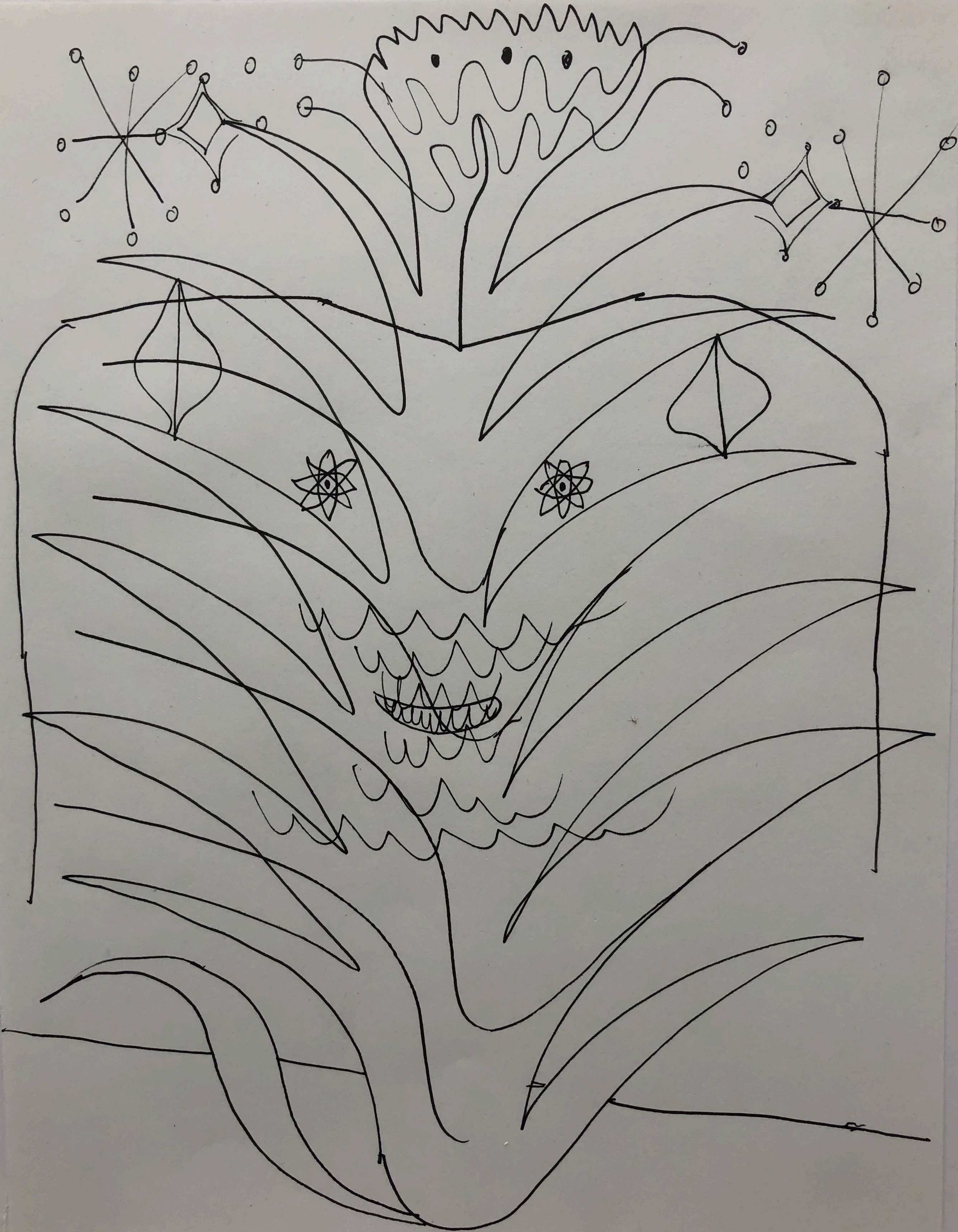


A thought is no different from a leaf and a phrase is no different from a branch, it's the growth of the moment or the season.

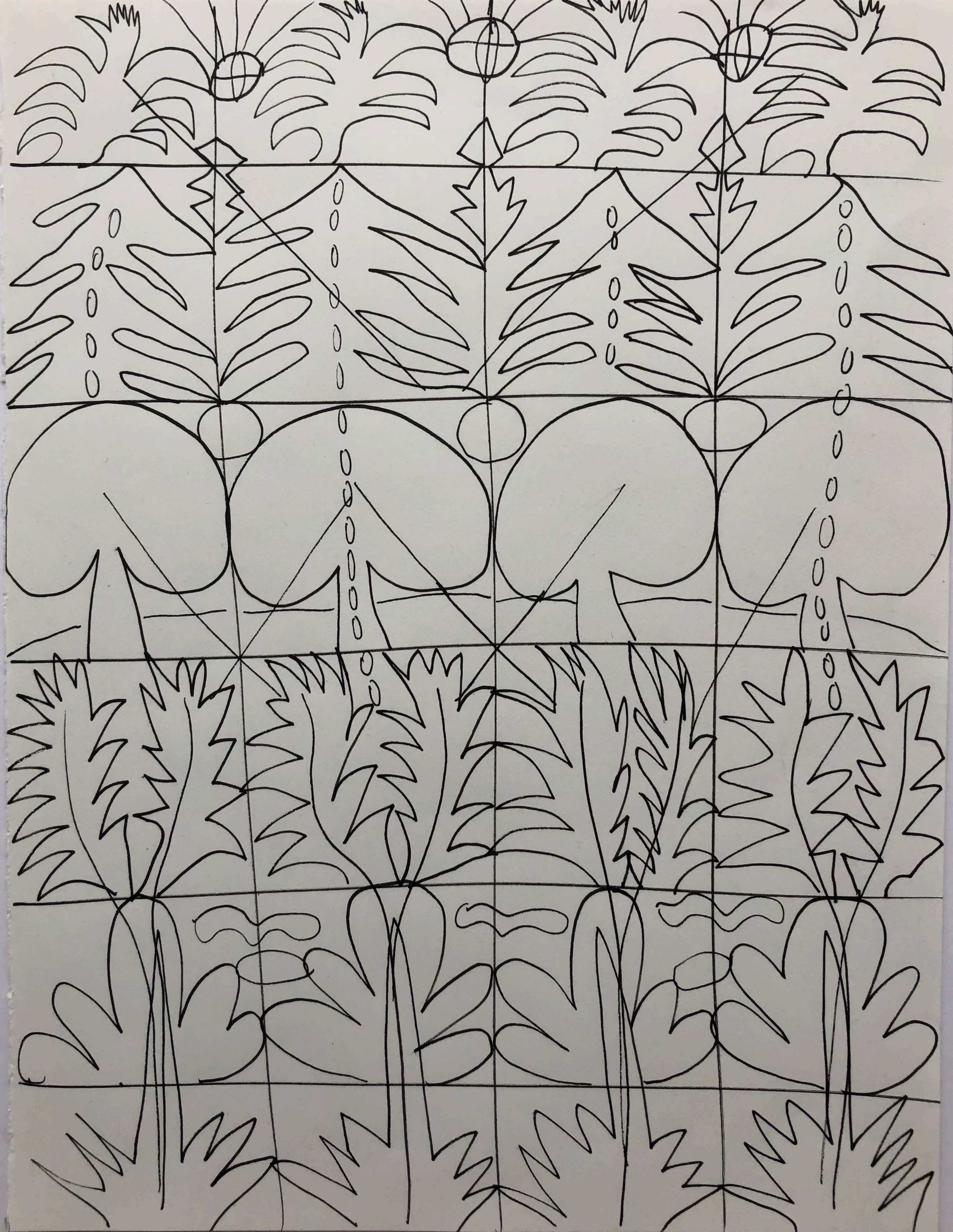
Allan Ginsberg, from First Thought Best Thought, 1975 Lecture, Naropa University





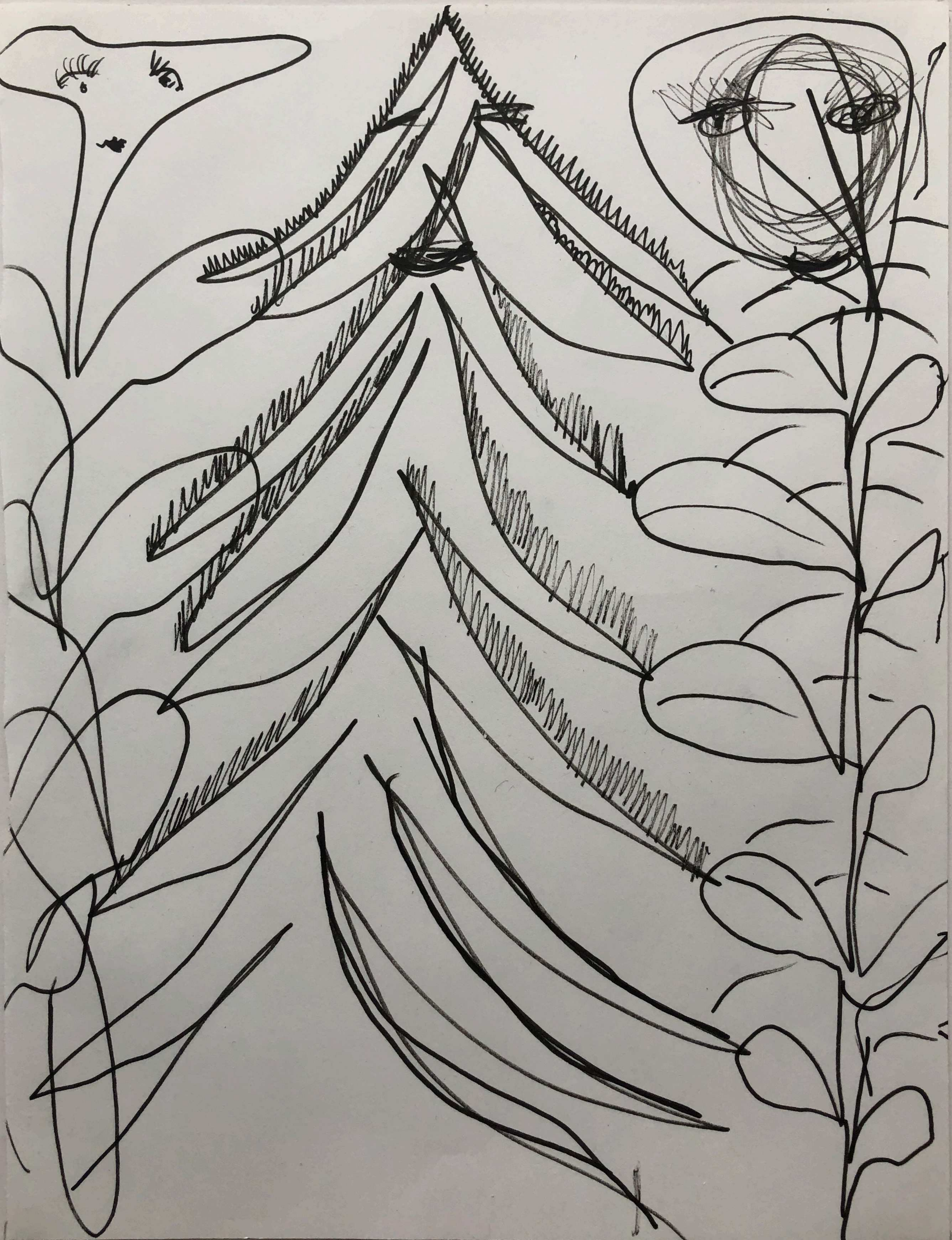




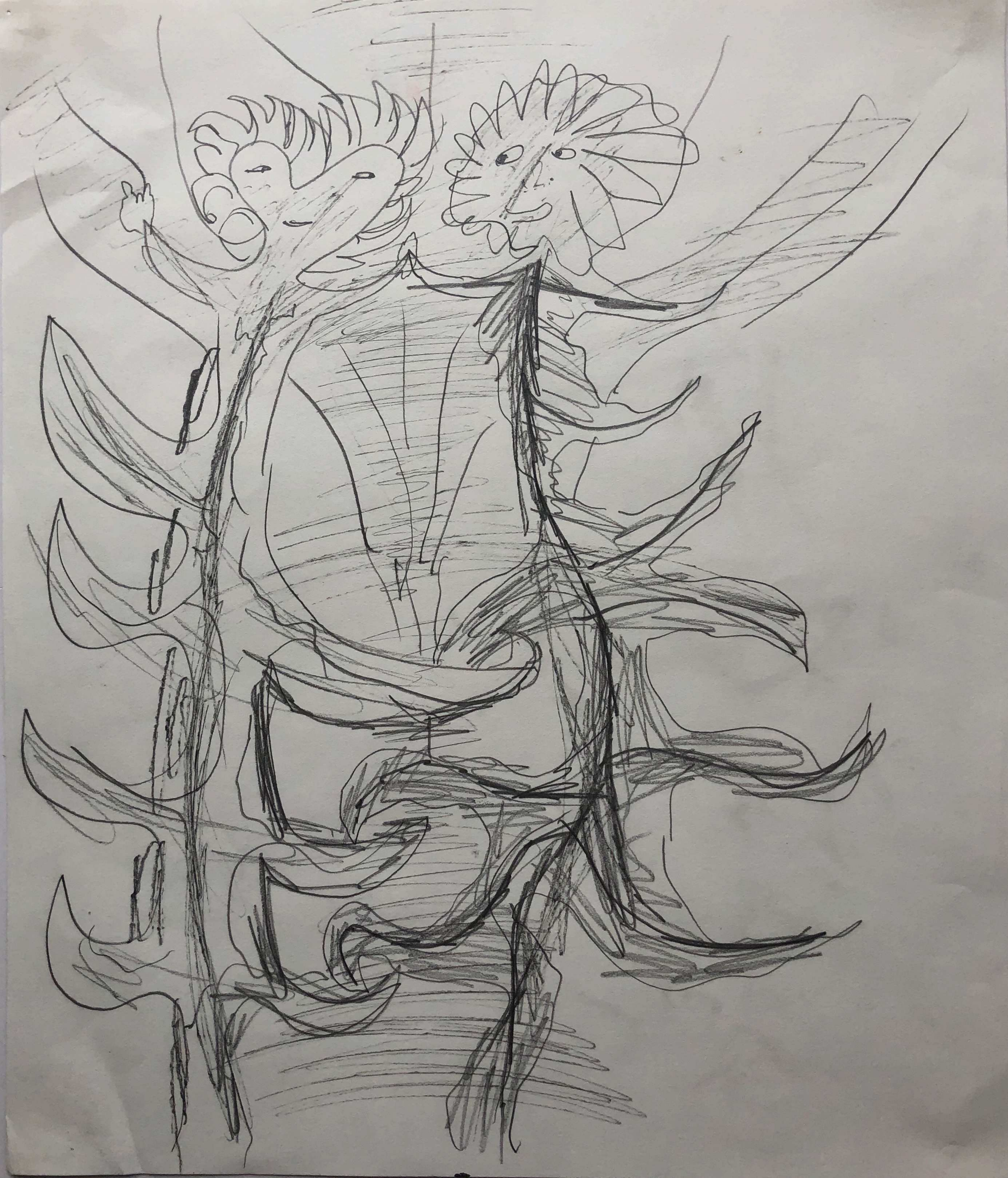


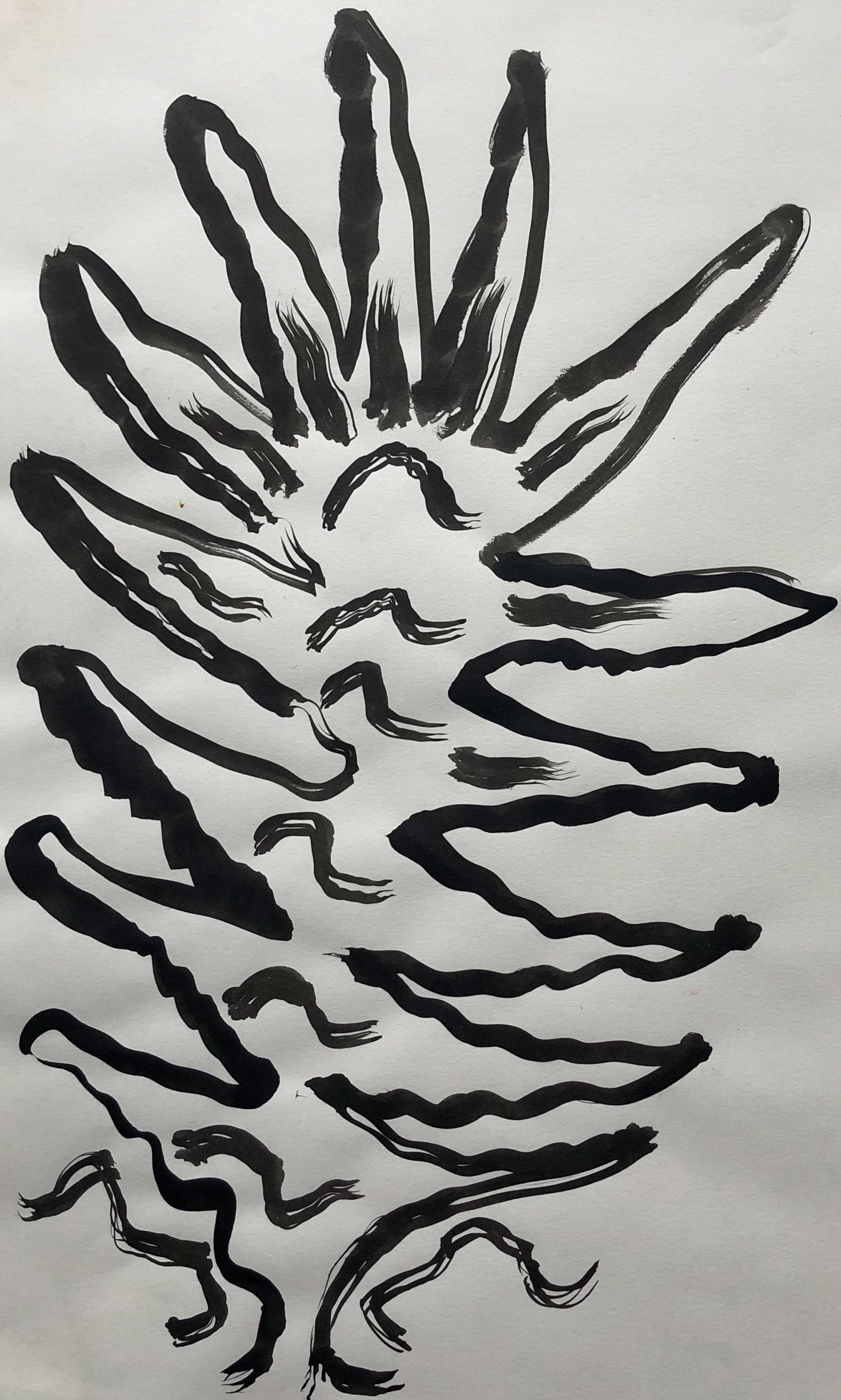




















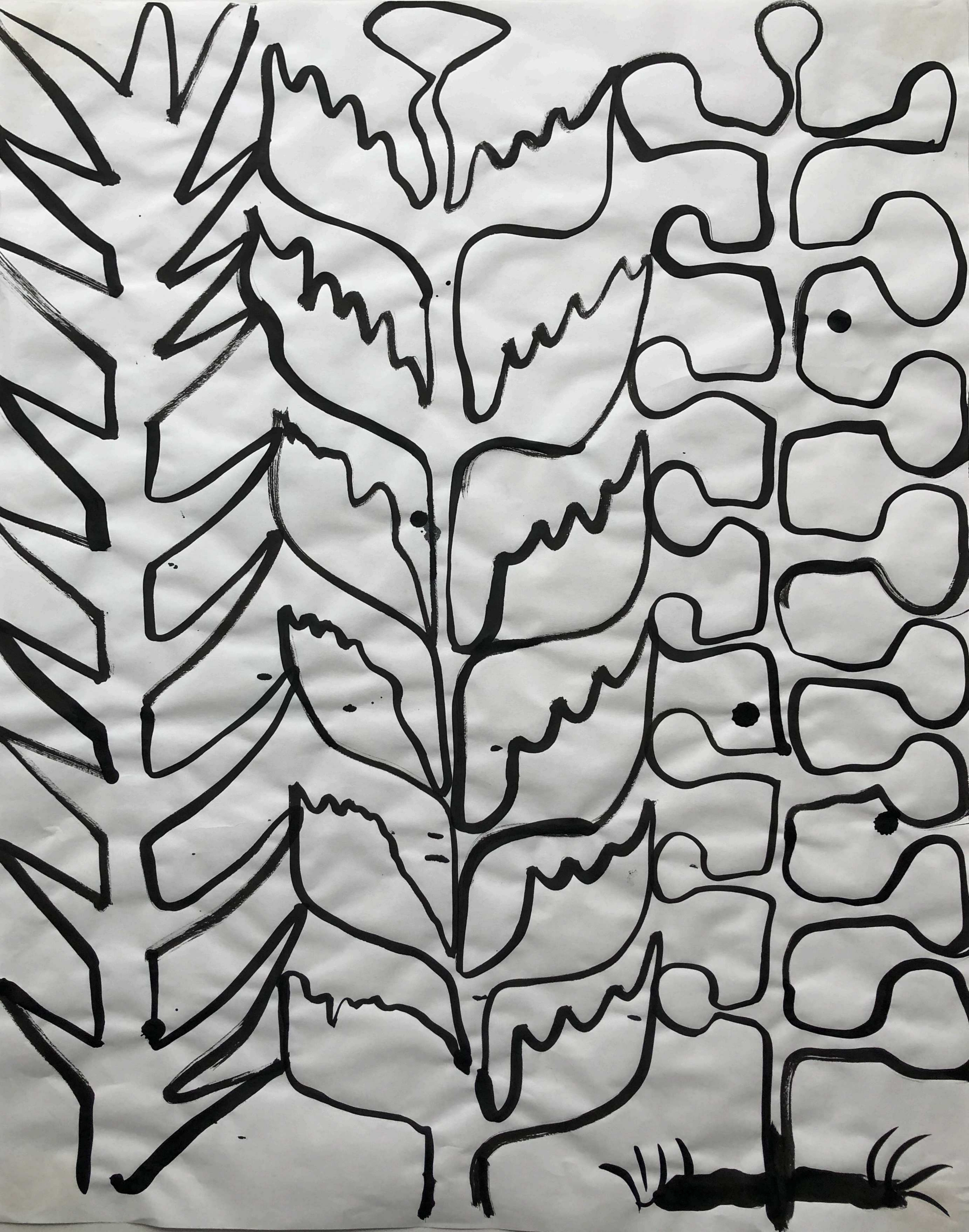








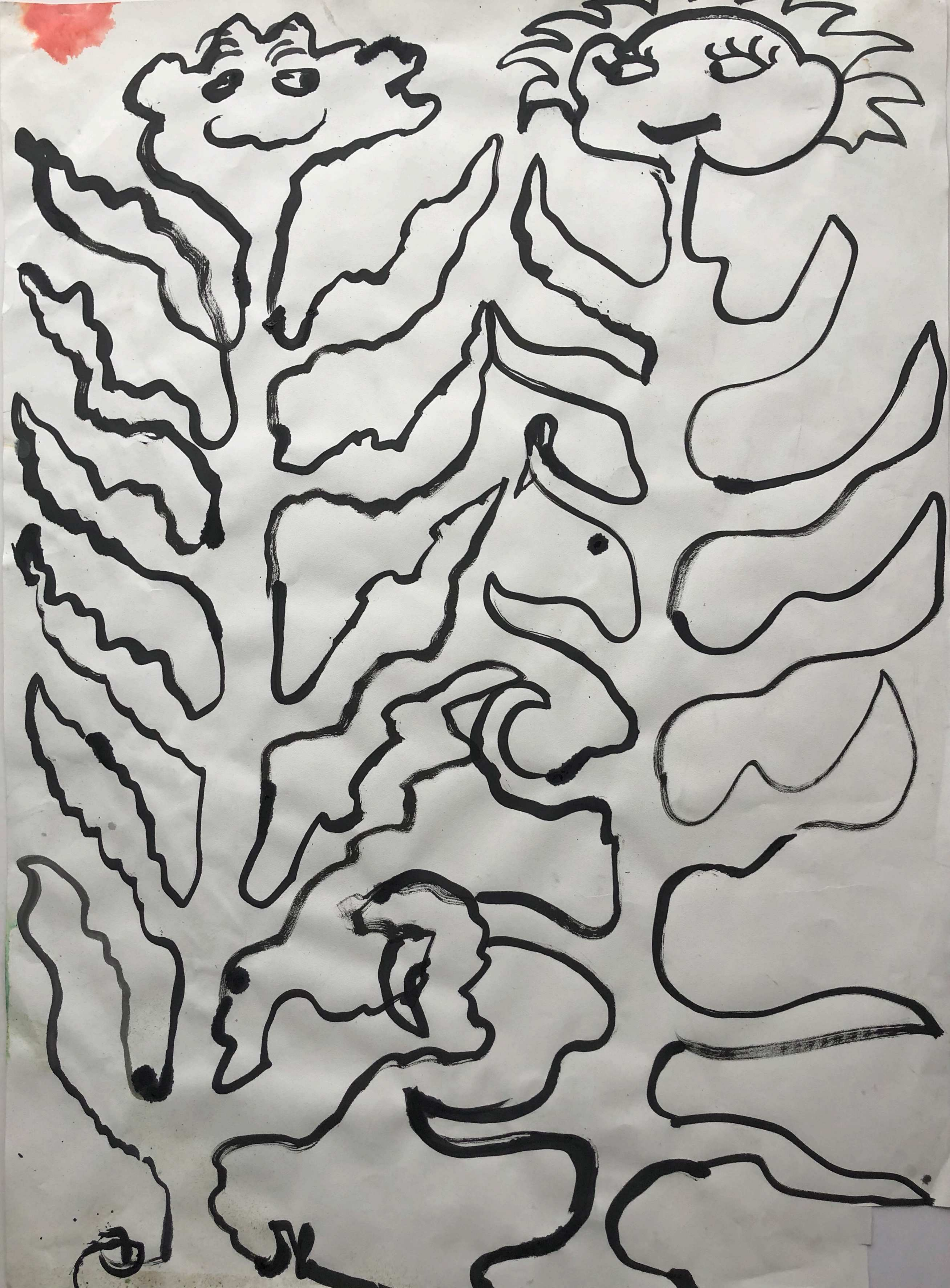


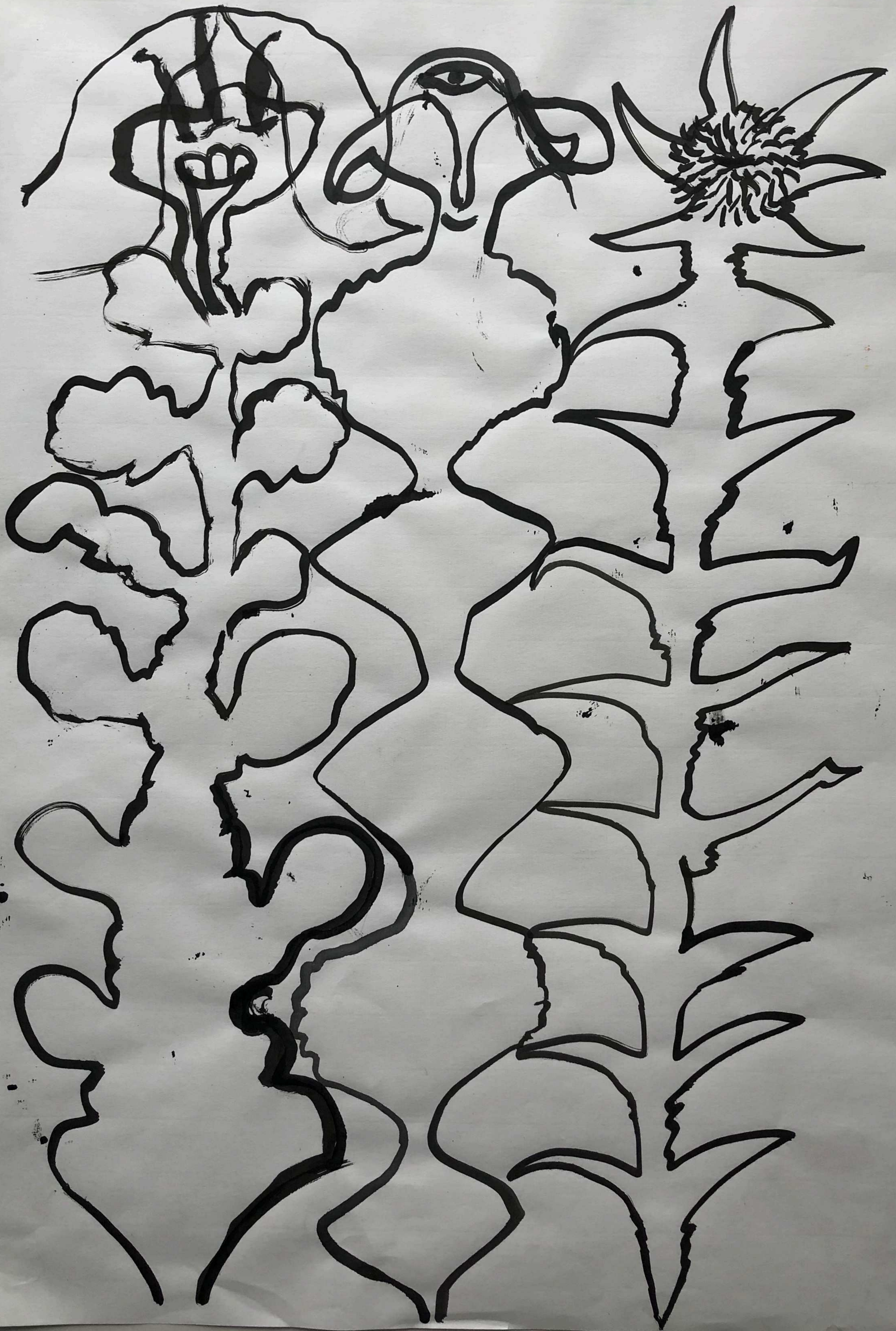








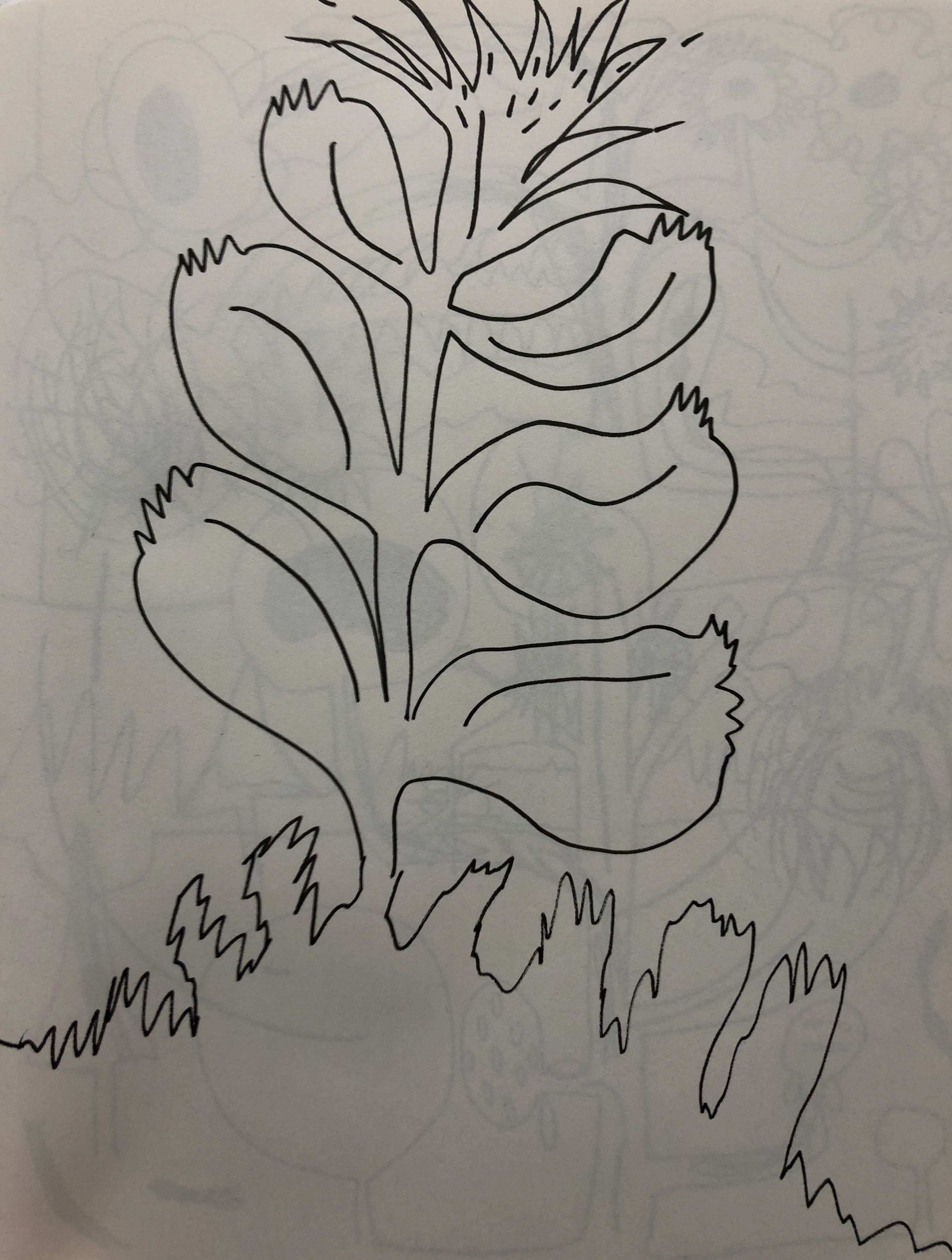




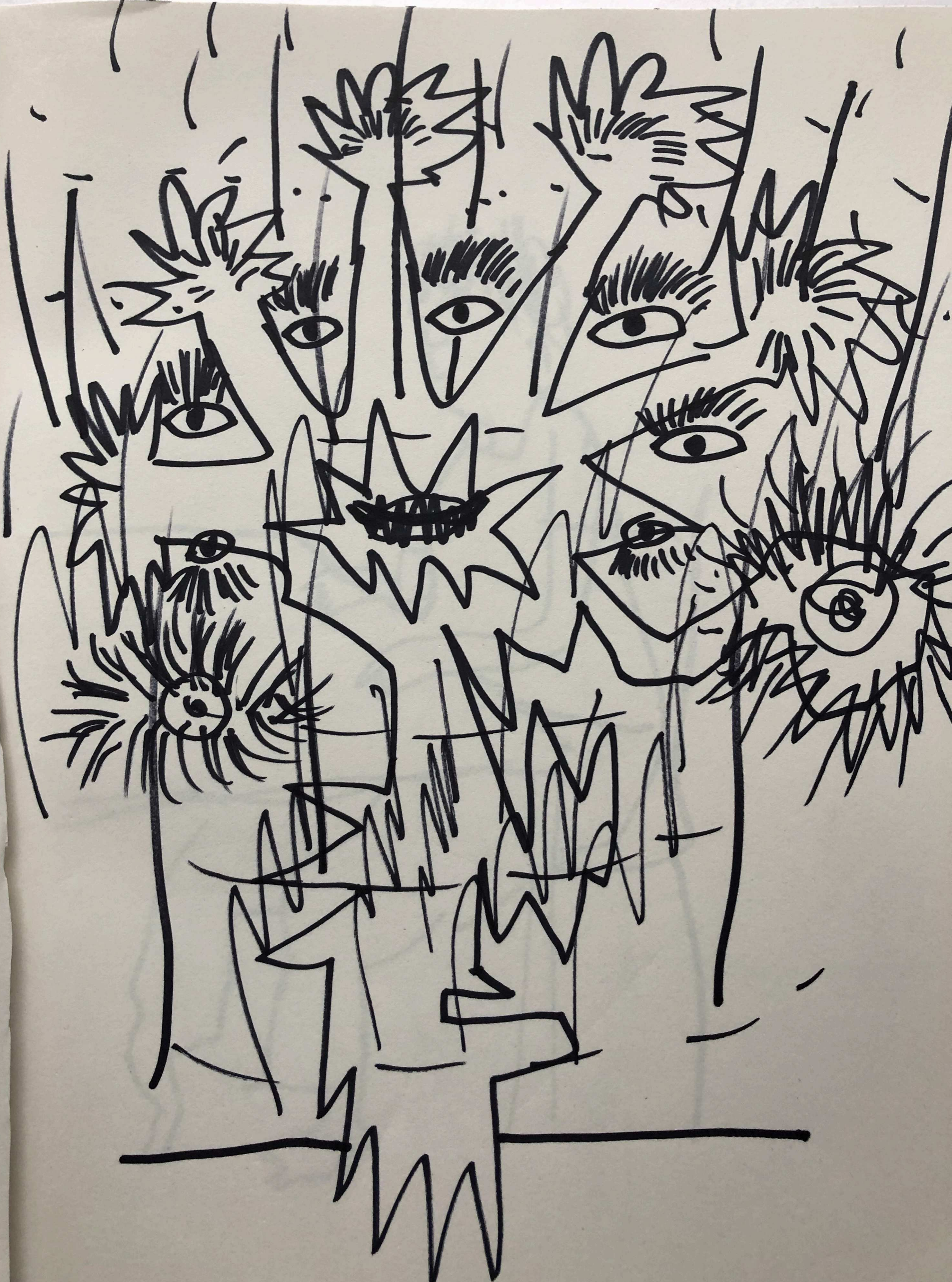




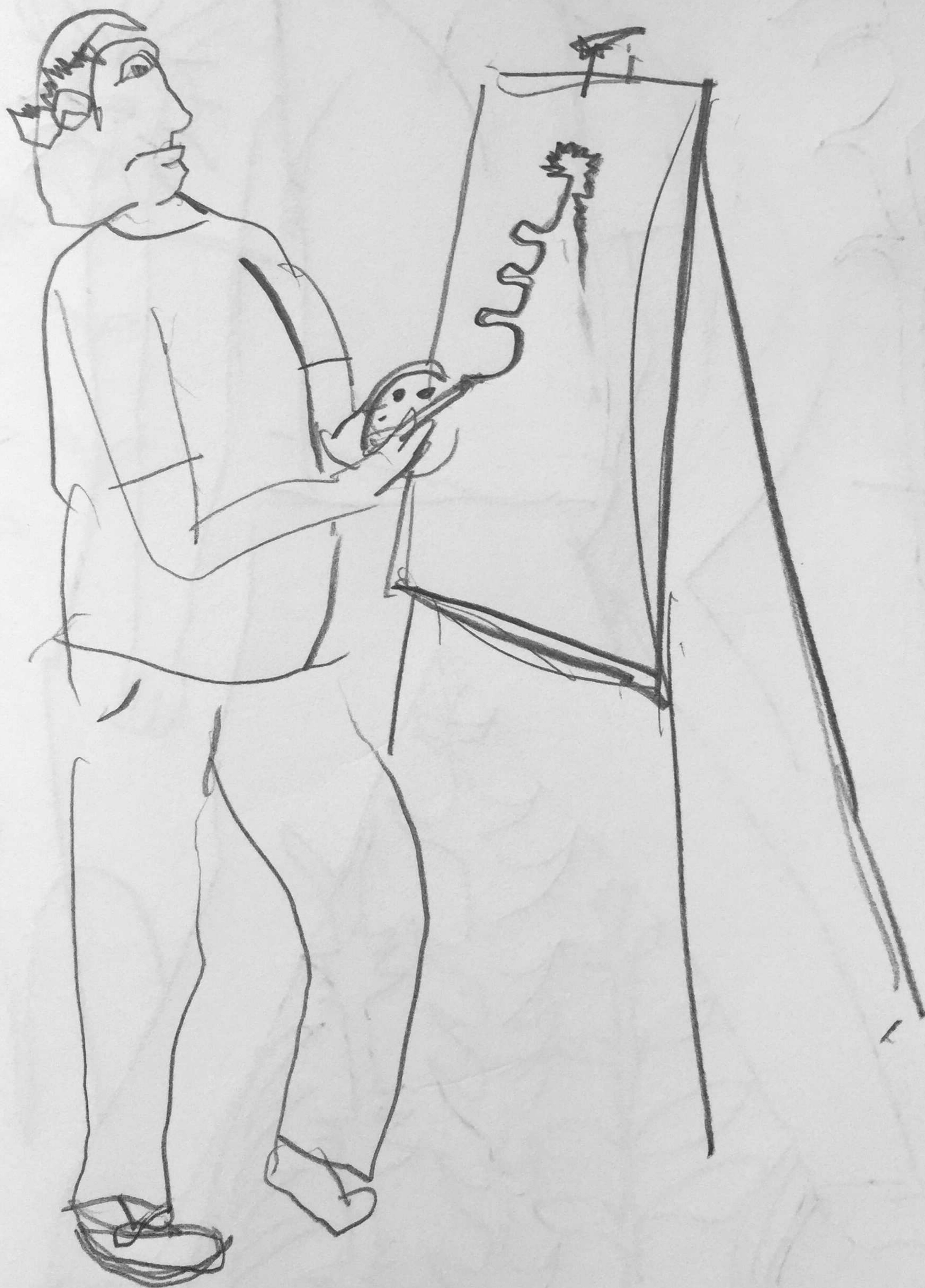




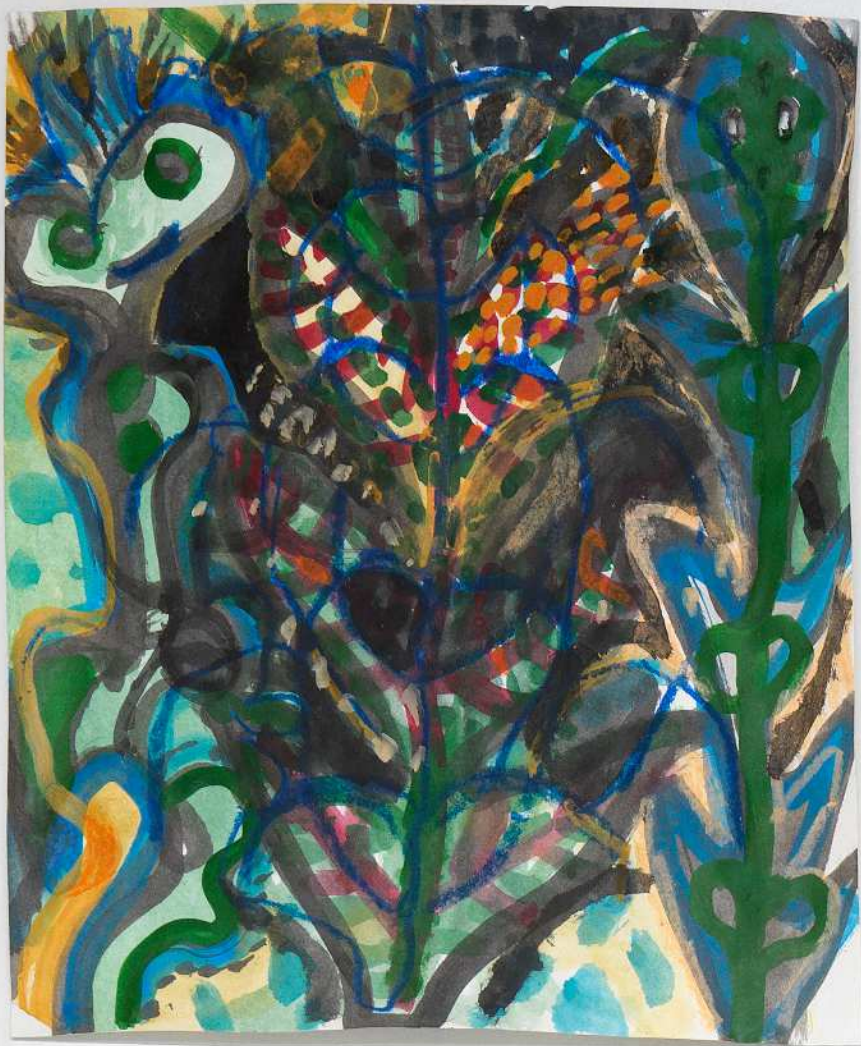
















A CONVERSATION: SCOTT WOLNIAK & GALLERY DIRECTOR CLAUDINE ISÉ

Cl: Let's start with your studio. Do you have any routines or rituals you follow to get you going when you begin a session in the studio?

I usually start by taking stock of what's there, reviewing work in progress, assessing pieces that may or may not be finished. I will often spend time just moving things around, arranging pieces on the wall, thinking about groupings and relationships. I do this until an opening presents itself... anyplace that I can drop into the work.

I get a lot of work done at night, when there are less distractions.

Getting in the zone is partly about vibe, but mostly about just getting busy. Incense helps (I really like Zouz Incense, made by Mike Pare in Milwaukee), and music is a constant. Music is like coffee for me in the studio. I listen to a huge variety of different kinds of music. Lately it's been a lot of ambient, tonal stuff and jazz, especially experimental and free jazz.

I never work continuously on a single piece from start to finish. I will have several things going at a time, which allows me to jump between works and helps prevent too much rigidity from setting in. I try work in a way that disrupts some of the really sticky attachments that can develop with a piece.

I have been meditating seriously for about five years, doing a daily practice of about 30 minutes. This is not directly part of my studio routine, but it doesn't hurt. I feel like that has kind of set the stage for me to be present and responsive in the studio, and I think also has helped me to sustain projects for longer periods.

Cl: As an artist you've always been deeply engaged with material and material explorations. The final forms these explorations and experimentations take often reference plants and natural landscapes. Even the pulped Artforum rocks and cairns have a relationship to geology and the materials that form landscape – the literal materiality of ground. Can you share what you find compelling about plant/botanical forms and natural forms generally, and how those forms may link up to your engagement with process and materiality?

SW: The immersive sensory complexity of the landscape, forests especially, has always moved me beyond words, and this is one reason that I have tried to represent it in my work. Botanical forms

and nature very broadly defined have provided me with endless examples of aesthetic beauty and models for thinking about art forms. The variegation of trees and plants, patterns and textures, the movement of light and wind, sounds and smells... there is so much to take in. In addition to all the sensory stuff, I have a strong heart connection to wild places.

I notice nature wherever I am and at all different scales, even just scraggly weeds that pop through cracks in concrete.

I spend a good amount of time in beautiful natural places each year, in the summer, and I feel like I store it up in my nervous system for the winter.

With past projects, I used specific materials for conceptual purposes, often with materials coming directly from the landscape or landfill. I experiment a lot with different techniques. Some experiments yield interesting results and others don't.

Sometimes I will use a piece of the landscape directly, as a tool to make a mark, like a branch as a brush or a rock as a stencil. This allows me to embed the landscape into the form of a work.

I like finding new uses for materials, letting one project cross pollinate with another. My very first paper pulp painting happened when the material I was using for a sculpture jumped across the studio into a painting. At that point, the link between plant fiber and plant imagery couldn't be resisted.

Are the forms in your plant paintings and drawings based on actual plant types (or abstracted versions of real plants?)

They are not based on models or observation. They're intuitive and completely made up based on ideas that I have about plants and landscape. They are cartoons, in a way. I invent new plant-shapes through drawing and there is a lot of room for play. Something that I love about drawing botanical forms is that the imagery is very connected to way I naturally draw. When building a new plant or field, I try to work as spontaneously as possible. The further along I get along with a piece, the slower things get.

CI: Many of your paintings involve building layers of different materials upon a surface, and/or which combine additive and subtractive processes together, as with the intricately carved surfaces of your Tablet works. Over the past few years, you've also been exploring paper cut-outs, which involve subtractive processes. What led you to this?

SW: Reductive processes like cutting, scratching and carving into surfaces and materials are interesting alternatives to straight drawing and painting. I am making marks through removal, which changes the speed and precision of the gestures. It also complicates the relationship between physical and illusory space.

My [Tablet](#) series was definitely about earth. I think of them as topographies and strata, or like fossils of paintings.

The new cut paper pieces are more about light and air. They are a response to the Tablets- they behave similarly but have opposite energies.

I am interested in how the cut-out areas fluctuate optically, revealing space beyond the drawing surface, interacting with the wall and opening the pieces up.

In considering cut-outs and their art historical lineage, I of course think back to Matisse. The image below is a shot from Matisse's studio wall in Venice, in 1948. His cut-out works are so joyous and pumping with energy, and I see the same vibrant, exuberant quality in your paintings of plant forms, plus a lot more weirdness and your humor is more overt and off-kilter. Is Matisse an artist you've looked at a lot – and would you consider Matisse an influence on your latest bodies of work?





I appreciate the connection. I do love Matisse. Pretty much anytime I see a Matisse painting in a museum it stops me in my tracks. I really like the images of him drawing in bed with the stick. It's hard to escape his influence, although I am not consciously referencing his work. I would say that I am going for that same quality of energy and playfulness. I am inclined to put groups of whimsical shapes together in ways that start to create an authentic feeling of the landscape, even if the individual parts are silly or cartoony.



Albrecht Dürer, 1503. Watercolour, pen and ink, 40.3 cm × 31.1 cm (15 7/8 in × 12 1/4 in)

Strangely, the piece of “botanical art” I’m most influenced by is far less playful-Durer’s “Great Piece of Turf,” from 1503. I like this painting because it shows incredible beauty in a small, unassuming clump of earth, which was unheard of at the time. Artists were only supposed to represent sublime grace through religious imagery, but Durer found it in a patch of grass and weeds. There’s an entire world in that little patch.

Could you also tell us a bit about your use of pumice in recent paintings? How does this material get integrated into your surfaces and compositions?

I started experimenting with pumice medium as I was transitioning away from plaster, and just after I began painting with paper pulp. I use both sporadically and in conjunction with pigment to deepen colors and to create fluctuating surfaces. I use texture and opacity in varying degrees to control the effects of light and reflectivity in the paintings’ surfaces. I have created my own paper pulp from magazines and pumice from ground up pistachio shells. I also use a premade pumice medium. Paint is mixed together with these earthy, granular materials and painted on.

In addition to the optical qualities, I like the conceptual implications of fiber and mineral elements within a piece, as part of its content.

The kinds of surface variations I'm describing go all the way down to the fiber of the canvas. I gesso my paintings irregularly, following drawn contours, leaving alternating areas unprimed. This functions like a kind of resist for the color, so values register differently on the primed or raw canvas. The first color applications after the gesso are stains, and then I slowly build up the surface textures, alternating between transparency and opacity. Washes of thin color are applied numerous times and over varied surfaces, synthesizing color mixes in an experimental way.

The combination of staining and pattern that I use has a relation to textile processes.

CI: Humor is present everywhere in your work – in your titles, in the little faces that grin out at us from within many of your compositions, in your use of sinewy forms and vivid color schemes that makes me think a little bit of Dr. Seuss's illustrations. (Theodor Geisel had a secret art practice, you know – just for fun, below is an example of one of his paintings placed next to one of yours). Can you talk a bit about how you yourself think about the role of humor in your work – and when it comes to your own paintings, what qualities about them are funny or amusing to you?



SW: Thanks for this question. Humor has been an important part of my work forever. As a kid, I made funny drawings to get laughs. Self-taught cartooning and caricature drawing was my earliest art education. I appreciate the Dr. Seuss reference. I hadn't really thought about this until now, but his illustrations, along with Shel Silverstein, was probably my first influence.

When drawing directly from my imagination, I end up inventing a lot of strange representations, because I have never been especially good at realism without using a template from the world. My sense of proportion is especially off kilter. Also, though, free drawing is just really fun and liberating. My sketchbook is where my most raw imagery occurs. I work out a lot of new forms in the sketchbook and make little "snap shots" of ideas or observations from everyday life.

Sometimes an idea can be truly funny, but what I really think is hilarious is *the way* a thing is drawn. I have always been a fan of physical, dumb and deadpan humor. I guess I try to draw things dumbly, but also very straight. That doesn't mean it's not complicated. It has to do with productive awkwardness, which can render an image ridiculous but also real.

I appreciate humor without a punchline.

That kind of raw imagery that happens in my sketchbook is always part of my paintings and cut paper pieces, but it usually gets buried. As I build up layers, I leave gaps and little moments where you can see it poking through.

I should also say that I never allow a piece to remain just silly or cute. I try to complicate it with opposing forces of darkness or anxious energy. It's always about balance, push-pull.

Cl: Following up on this question about humor, one of the many things I love about your paintings is that they really reward looking, and looking in a deep sense – looking into and through their surfaces. Humor and playfulness is one of those rewards. When I look closely at some of them, I see all sorts of little pictures that in some cases have been intentionally put there, and in other cases I'm not sure if the imagery I'm seeing is the equivalent to looking at a Rorschach blot. The reddish painting that was on the floor of your studio when I visited is filled with little wonders like this – I see a grinning face, plus creatures that look like dinosaurs and maybe salamanders. Is what I see put there by you, or are they happy accidents of paint, material, and application?



SW: Thank you for looking closely! Yes to both... The things that you are seeing are there to be found. Imagery is intentional in some cases and random in others.

The first layers of a painting often contain the most explicit imagery, which is usually covered up, cropped or embedded as a piece evolves. If I am drawing a field of weeds for example, I might drop in a face or a bug to break things up. I rely on chance alignments to achieve relational energy and friction between layers.

I use pattern quite a bit in my compositions, and I feel like occasional anthropomorphic shapes, figures or faces peeking out can provide a nice anchor point, a moment of recognition, like saying to the viewer, "Hello! there is an entire world in here." These small moments can be funny or surprising...or disruptive. They can slow down the process of looking. This is also a way that the visual space of my paintings refers to immersive experiences in the landscape. It has to do with point of view. If you were to crawl through a field of tall grass, you might encounter lots of surprising things.