

These prints are inspired by the literary works of the Beat Generation. I first gravitated towards literature and how it can often be a key component for inspiring social change. I read the work of 1950's "Beat" authors—Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg. These writers employed new literary devices, taboo subject matter, and radical ideas within their work to provoke new ways of thought. These works were initially considered "obscene," but they ultimately led to a huge moral shift within American culture. I am very drawn to the poem "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg, both to the content and to the style, as it was a cry of protest against the social norms and morals of mainstream American culture in its time. This poem ultimately inspired me to write my own poetry about social taboos surrounding human touch.

I chose the medium of printmaking because it is bold, straightforward, and the polar opposite of my nature. It makes a strong statement in itself. When I think of the influential literature of the Beat era, I think of the significance of the typewriter. I typed my poetry using an old-fashioned typewriter as a nod to the literature that I was inspired by. The scroll format came from Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, which was originally typed on one continuous scroll.

This work addresses social taboos surrounding human touch. I based my poetry on my personal experiences with touch, and worked in chronological order from when I felt the most comfortable with touch when I was a child, to when I grew older and became more aware of social "rules" surrounding touch. When examining this artwork, I encourage viewers to think about their personal experiences with touch, and what society might be like if these social rules didn't apply.

Tatiana

I have always felt a deep connection with the written word, whether it be song lyrics, a poem, or a novel. Written words can be a way of articulating ideas, organizing thoughts, or conveying a specific message. But most important, words can create change. Through my research of literature that contributes to social change, I discovered that one of the most influential literary movements was considered to be the Beat era, in which a group of young authors protested the conformity of 1950's American morals.

Upon reading the work of the Beats, I was most inspired by the characters portrayed in the literature of the time. The Beats often focused on shaping the types of characters and people in their everyday lives who were affected by strict social constructs, rather than employing a linear plot. Therefore, I chose to write my own poems based upon the observations of the people and issues surrounding me.

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Historical Context of the 1950's

After World War II, the post-war economy was booming, conformist values were at an all time high, and most families in 1950's America were striving towards "the American dream": a suburban house with a white picket fence, a wife for cooking and cleaning, and a husband with a 9-to-5 office job. Once the 1960's began, a cultural and moral shift began to occur. The youth were growing tired of the stifling, capitalistic, monotonous values of their elders, and craved a change of values within their country.

This desire for change inspired a counter-culture movement which started with a group of authors who attended Columbia University in New York City in the 1940's, known as the "Beat" authors. The term "Beat" was derived from the slang at the time, and referred to those who were being "beaten down" by mainstream culture. When the group began, it consisted of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs. Inspired by the transcendentalists, particularly Walt Whitman, these authors used the human experience as a lens to critique society. They all were anti-conformists, who wished to address social issues in society at the time such as sexual repression and the dangers of consumerism.

In 1950's America, sexual expression was a very taboo subject. Explicit discussion of sexuality was deemed as extremely crude, and homosexuality was considered a disease of sorts that could only be cured through institutionalized care in a mental facility. To Allen Ginsberg, and many of the other Beat authors, sexuality was thought of as something that should be free to discuss and express, and in their writings they took a very blunt approach to the discussion of sexuality. Many literary works of the time underwent obscenity trials due to their explicit content, but ultimately the controversy around these works led to literary freedom in the next generation.

Another theme very important to the Beats was nonconformity, especially in regard to the social construct of Capitalism. The Beats thought of Capitalism as very dangerous for humanity; a system that brainwashed the public into mindless consumption. For example, in "Howl," Ginsberg portrays Capitalism as an evil god named Moloch who devours the minds of individuals within society. Through their writings on these taboo topics, the Beats initiated a shift in the content of literature from censored texts, to those which took on more explicit subject matters such as drug use, sexuality, and nonconformity, therefore fostering new ways of thought and action for the next generation.

Analysis of “Howl”

One of the most influential pieces of writing from the Beat generation is “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg. “Howl,” a 112-line poem, is split into 3 sections, written in long lines of free verse, reminiscent in style of “Song of Myself” (1855) by Walt Whitman. The poem encompasses all of the themes of Beat literature, protesting the conformity of 1950’s American morals, the repression of sexuality, and the dangers of consumerism. It is a cry, a howl of protest, and a commentary on the strain between the pressures of mainstream society and the individual.

Ginsberg uses the lens of his personal relationships and experiences to shape the message of the poem, which is that consumerist society was crushing the human spirit. He explored closely the types of people who were affected by social constructs, identified the evils of society, and showed his sympathy to those he considered to be the most affected by this evil.

The first section of “Howl” exemplifies the types of individuals who were protesting American mainstream society:

*“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked,
Dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix”*

The school dropouts, the drug users, the world travelers—those who were considered to be mad: Ginsberg considered a wide variety of people to be affected by the problems of mainstream society. He observed the individuals around him, and used them as a way of posing issues that were occurring at the time. Ginsberg uses explicit, bold imagery in order to convey his message.

The second section of the poem focuses on what destroyed the great minds of Ginsberg’s generation, specifically an evil god named Moloch:

*“Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable
dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys
sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!”*

In the Hebrew Bible, Moloch is a god who accepted the sacrifices of children, but in “Howl” Moloch is a heartless machine to be associated with the evils of Capitalism, war, and mainstream culture. By using Moloch as the antagonist, Ginsberg suggests that the evils of mainstream society prey on the pure human spirit; the innocents of the world, much like this God, preyed on the souls of innocent children in the old Hebrew texts.

The third and final section of “Howl” addresses Carl Solomon, to whom the poem is dedicated. Ginsberg met Solomon in the waiting room of the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute, in which he was institutionalized as an alternative to a prison sentence. The two had become close friends in the eight months that Ginsberg spent there. In this section, Ginsberg uses the shorter, fictional name of “Rockland” when describing the institute:

*“Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland
where you’re madder than I am
I’m with you in Rockland
where you must feel very strange
I’m with you in Rockland
where you imitate the shade of my mother”*

Ginsberg communicates his sympathy for those who have been driven insane by the constraints of society, and also his frustrations at the way the US treated people in mental institutions. He writes about his own mother, who herself was institutionalized, comparing Solomon’s mental

state to hers. When using “madder,” Ginsberg denotes those people in mental institutions who were suffering most from oppressive mainstream society.

In the footnote of the poem, Ginsberg addresses a theme that was dear to many of the transcendentalists, the vessel of the human body. A multitude of the Beat poets wrote of the importance of the human body, emphasizing that it grounds us in reality, and can provide us with a sense of enlightenment, being the one similarity that we all share as human beings. As Ginsberg wrote, “The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy!”

My Personal Connection to the Beats

I found that the way in which the Beats used characters as a mode of communicating social issues to be very influential on my writing. As I witness modern social issues, I often feel helpless to do anything to fix these problems. I have found that one of the most productive ways of dealing with this sense of helplessness is to write about what I see, and to observe the people around me, whether they be in a coffee shop, subway, or walking down the street. I often find that just by observing people, you can find out a lot about a social construct, or the personality of an individual. In the following series of poems, I used my daily observations of people to pinpoint issues in our society, specifically the cultural taboos around touch and the sense of isolation that the overuse of technology can bring. Much like the Beats, I too, feel as though consumerism and technology have begun to destroy our sense of humanity. Nowadays, we communicate with people sitting five feet away from us without ever sharing a word, which is a problem. To remedy this, I believe that we can better use our human vessels of touch and speech as a way to ground ourselves back into the world, and into one another.

Solitude, as Determined by Brainwashed Humans

1.

Their heads bow down

Glancing at ancient periodicals with wine advertisements

Steam rises above their salt and peppered heads

The pillowy curls caressing the ceiling fan as it makes its lazy rotation

2.

Many individuals

Each immersed in their busywork

All sharing one similarity

The cup of coffee that rests on the table beside them

In a never ending flow

3.

I imagine what it would be like if the empty chairs were occupied

If the empty eyes and frantically scrolling fingers were to cease

If the constant metallic roar of the passing cars were to be silenced

Would the hollow-faced youth be engaged with the ghost in the seat across from them?

Or would they still be a shell

Paying more attention to the fuzzy pop music emulating from the radio in the corner

Than to the ghost who occupies the empty chair?

Touch is a Fragile Thing

I remember the first time she rested her head on my shoulder
The weight of the appendage heavy like hot air on a summer's day
She sighs heavily, inhaling then exhaling
The nostalgic scent of vibrantly colored flowers

She plays with my hair
Fingers gently raking through gnarled tresses
Expertly weaving dandelions in and out with small hands
She grazes the back of my neck with her fingers
I feel the tightness and discomfort in my ribcage as I try to compose myself

Purple haired baristas portray the falsehood of optimism
As they compliment you on the color of your sweater
They hand you a coffee, their fingertips grazing yours

Humans are afraid to touch because of the permanent marks they could leave
Bruises need to be treated by apology
For they are the reminders that the power of touch was too strong
The unacquainted avoid each other like opposing forces
When you brush up against a stranger
You flinch because you think you bruised them.

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