

ENCOUNTERS



Althea Murphy-Price



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January 17 – May 23, 2021

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cover: *Play Series: More Please* (detail), 2015
lithograph, screenprint, collage, 30 x 22.5 inches

cover background and left: *Ombre Series: Galaxy* (detail), 2018
lithograph on gampi paper, 24 x 19 inches



above: *Love Affair*, 2009, synthetic hair, glue, pearl tip pins, 48 x 39 inches

Splitting Hairs:

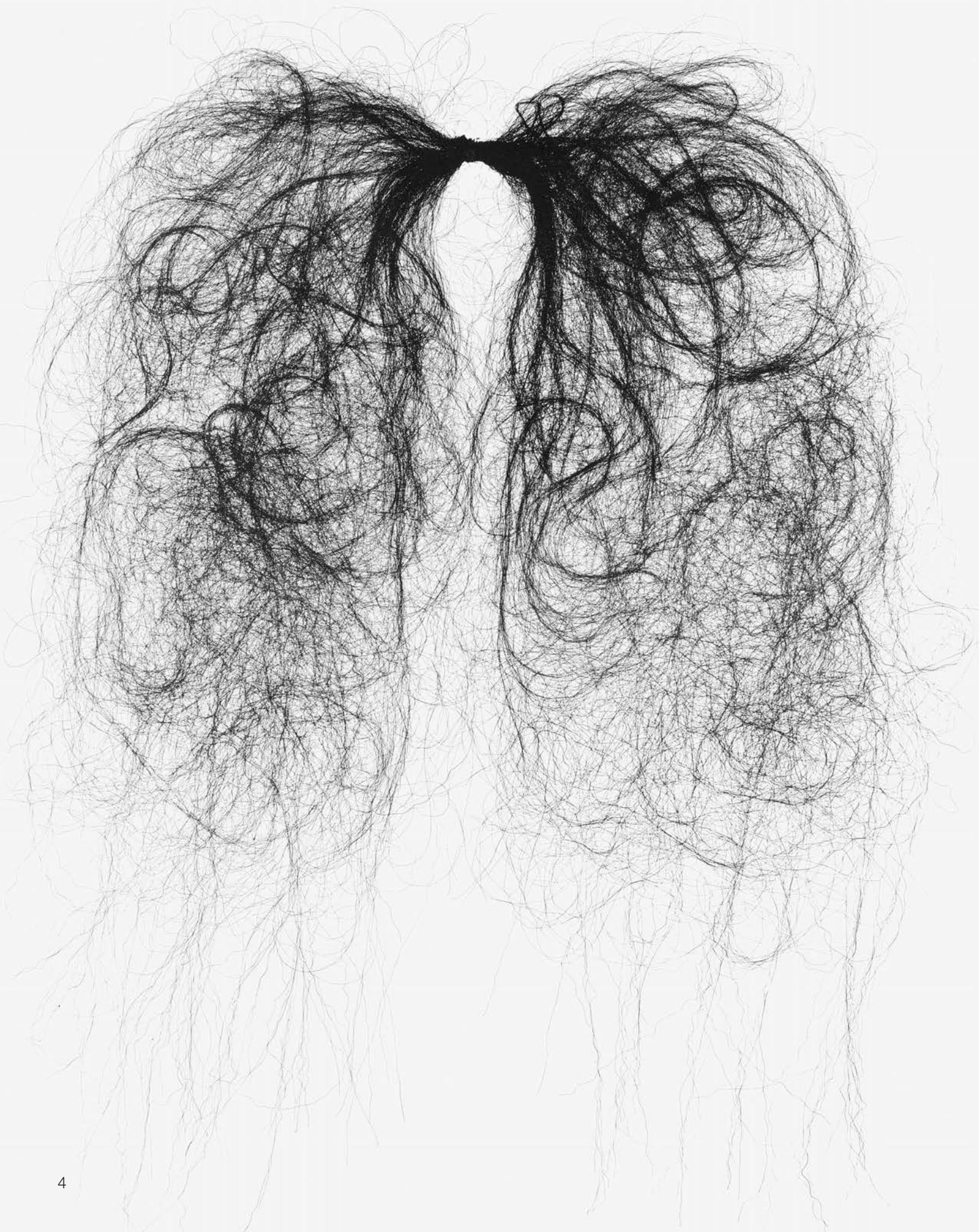
Object, Subject, and Self-Perception in the Works of Althea Murphy-Price

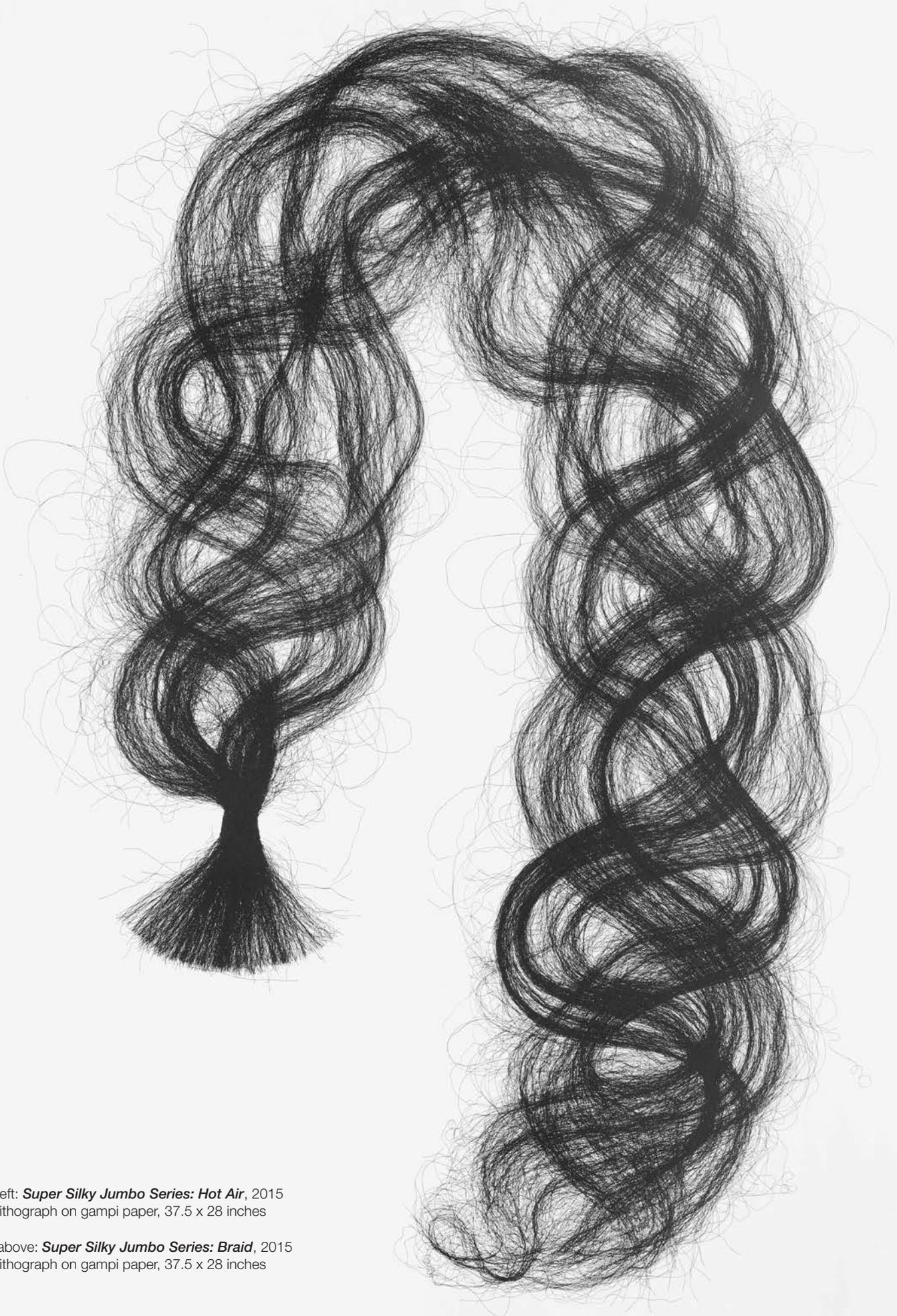
Peter J. Baldaia

The accomplished works of Althea Murphy-Price focus on a key element of the beauty industry to explore aspects of self-perception in contemporary culture. The artist utilizes manufactured human hair as both object and subject in her production, emphasizing its allure as transformative embellishment as well as its role as a potent signifier of race. She explains, "For me, hair symbolizes a myriad of things. It is symbolic of my identity as a black woman – almost like a self-portrait. I felt very underrepresented as a child, and my hair was the thing that very clearly differentiated me from my friends. So there's always a subjective connection to thinking about hair as a cultural identifier."

Murphy-Price has worked sculpturally with synthetic hair by manipulating and refashioning it into evocative artworks that are situated on pedestals and along gallery walls. She has also created ephemeral floorpieces in which hand-cut hair clippings are arranged to form delicate lacy patterns reminiscent of Persian carpets or Tibetan sand mandalas. Complementing these sculptural applications are Murphy-Price's prints, which reference and mimic individual aspects of the seemingly infinite world of artificial hair. While the majority are monotone lithographs, the artist collages colored screenprinted elements onto some to suggest actual hair accessories. "My desire with these prints is to deceive the eye," she observes, "so that one will look, and look again, and question whether it's the real thing or not." Murphy-Price's most recent works include a series of haunting photographs of anonymous young girls in weighty headpieces heavily styled with accessories made by the artist. "In making them," she says, "I want to communicate a degree of effort or labor that I associate with beauty maintenance."

I had the opportunity to chat with the artist from her studio in Knoxville, Tennessee, during an extended online session as we discussed her past and current work in preparation for this exhibition.





left: *Super Silky Jumbo Series: Hot Air*, 2015
lithograph on gampi paper, 37.5 x 28 inches

above: *Super Silky Jumbo Series: Braid*, 2015
lithograph on gampi paper, 37.5 x 28 inches

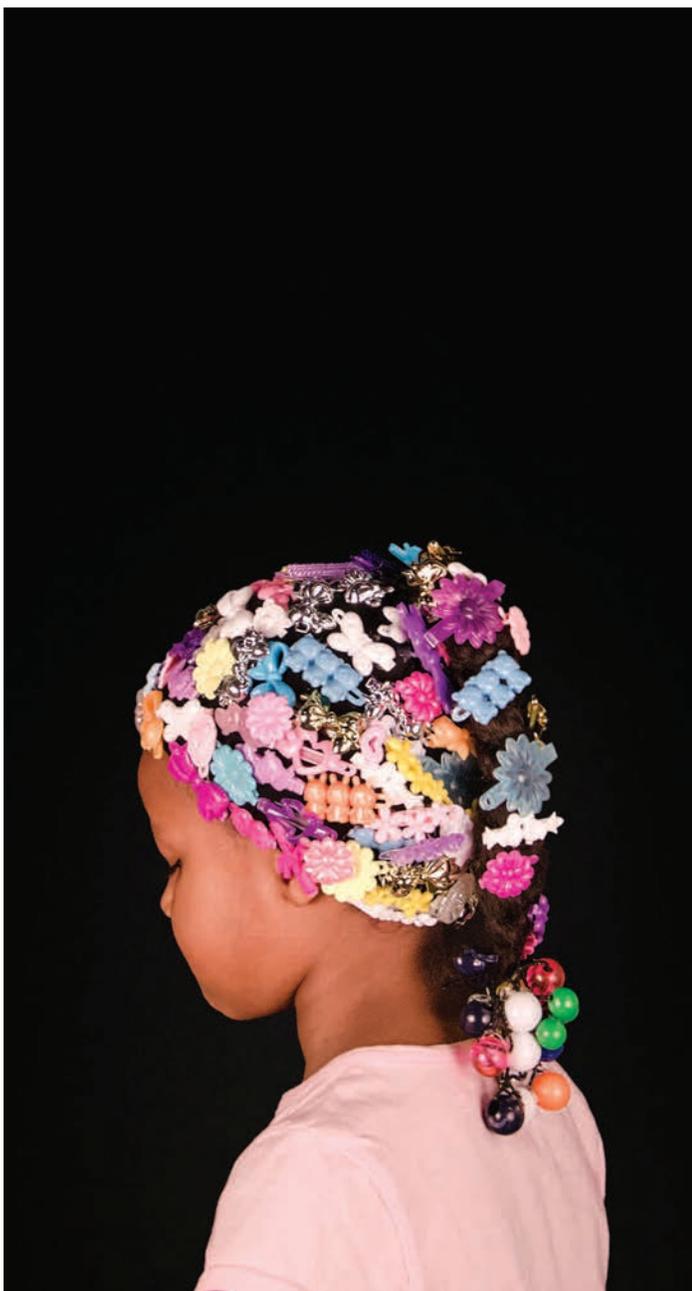


Goody Girl No. 1, 2018, giclee, 36 x 26 inches



Goody Girl No. 2, 2018, giclee, 36 x 26 inches

“I felt very underrepresented as a child, and my hair was the thing that very clearly differentiated me from my friends. So there’s always a subjective connection to thinking about hair as a cultural identifier.”



Goody Girl No. 3, 2018, giclee, 36 x 26 inches

Peter Baldaia: It’s great to finally meet you, even though under the current circumstances it has to be a virtual encounter. Can we begin by talking about where you started as an artist, and how your work has evolved over time?

Althea Murphy-Price: Sure. I was born in San Jose, California, and grew up in Boulder, Colorado. I decided to pursue my undergraduate college degree at Spelman College in Atlanta, and that’s where I became serious about making artwork. Before that I would create things here and there, but I definitely didn’t see art as a pathway for my life.

PB: What made you choose Spelman?

AMP: I needed to have an experience that was unachievable where I was living. All through my lower school education, I didn’t have peers who were the same race and gender as me, so I was desperate for that. I wanted to study at an HBCU because I felt there were gaps in things that I knew, and I needed to learn more about them. Attending Spelman was a huge cultural shift for me. While I was there, much of the work I created was about studying and analyzing the human condition, but none of it was yet related to issues of race and gender.

PB: Where did you go from there?

AMP: I continued my studies at Purdue University in Indiana, earning an MA in printmaking and painting, and then moved to Philadelphia to complete an MFA in printmaking at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. While I focused my studies in print media, printmaking has always been a tool for me. It’s a great combination of invention and method, and I think its sensibilities exist throughout much of my work.

PB: When did your work begin to address the nexus between gender, race, mass media, and the beauty culture through the subject of hair?

AMP: I’ve been engaged with this subject for a long time, and I’ve come to realize that upon first response many people think of body hair when they see my work. For me, hair symbolizes a myriad of things. It is symbolic of my identity as a black woman –



“It’s the mimicking that keeps me making the prints, because what does it mean to mimic – it’s deceiving, right? Method meets meaning so beautifully this way.”

almost like a self-portrait. I felt very under-represented as a child, and my hair was the thing that very clearly differentiated me from my friends. So there’s always a subjective connection to thinking about hair as a cultural identifier. But there is also a formal aspect to the material that I find quite beautiful. As an artist I’ve always taken a great interest in surface, and so most of my works that address this material have been facilitated through the process of printmaking, which allows for these things. Another aspect of my formal interest is in the act of making. I think of myself as a representational creator – I like to work from recognizable objects. All of these things are consistent in my process and work.

PB: How did you come to seize upon the exploration of hair as subject?

AMP: I started experimenting with hair in graduate school in Philadelphia, when I was searching for new ways to make artwork. Where I was living in North Philly, there were beauty stores on nearly every corner, stocked with synthetic hairpieces and colorful styling accessories. These items were so familiar to me since most of my childhood was spent wearing extensions, braids, barrettes, and the like. One day I bought a big bag of hair, and as I began to work with it, I felt as if it was kind of like my pencil or my paintbrush – I knew what I wanted to do with it.

One of the first things that I experimented with was screen printing words directly onto swatches of hair. I also began building with the material. When I started handling it in a way that was similar to styling my own hair, I became excited.

That led to making a series of sculptural “hats” in which I braided and twisted synthetic hair into bizarre and awkward shapes, supported on wire armatures. I made them all to my own head size, thinking that I would present them in a manner that related to fashion, perhaps as a runway performance. But that never happened because I’m not the performative type. I did follow up by creating a series of prints based on the hat forms. That was actually my first foray into lithography.

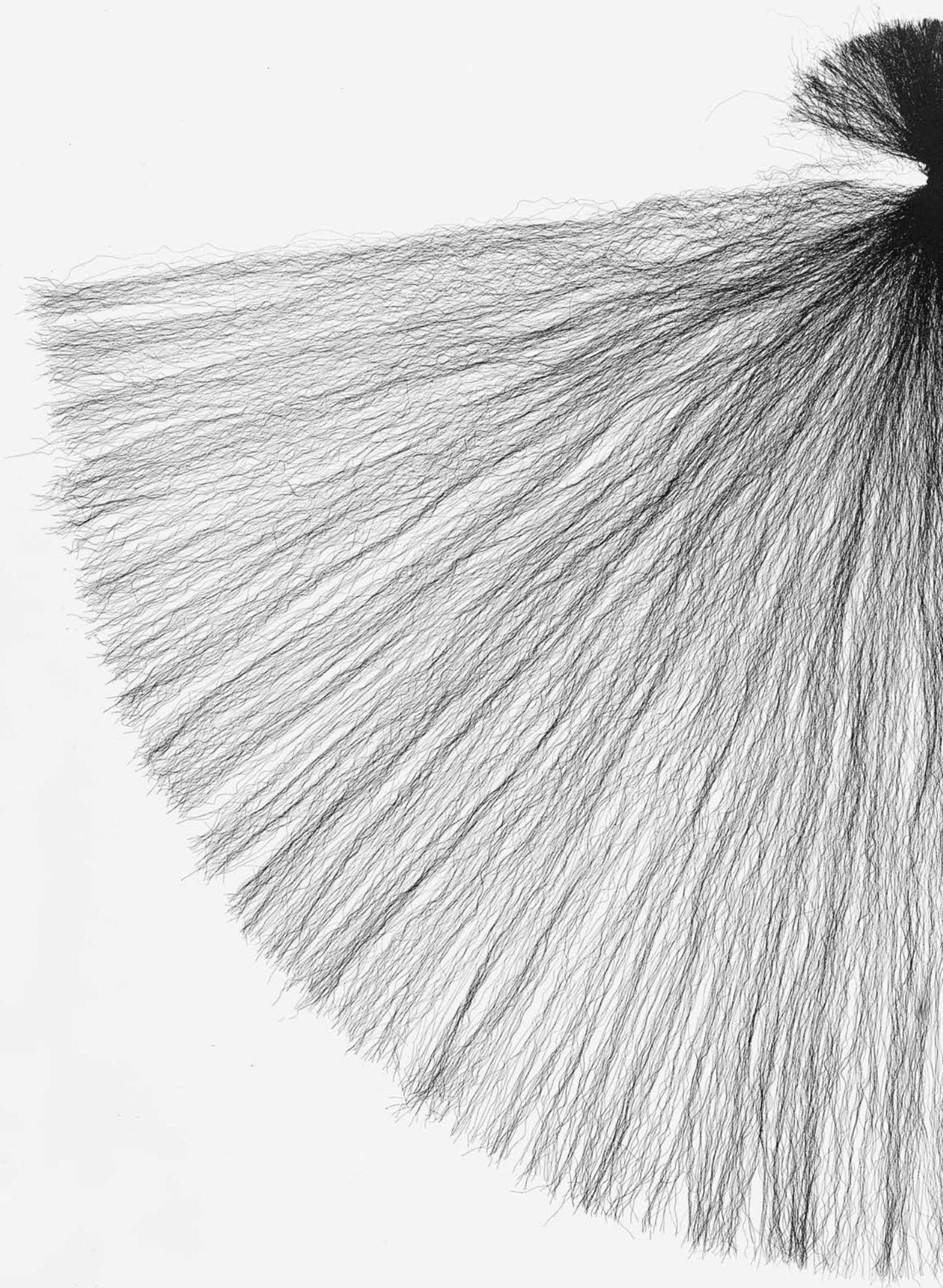
PB: How have you worked sculpturally with hair since then?

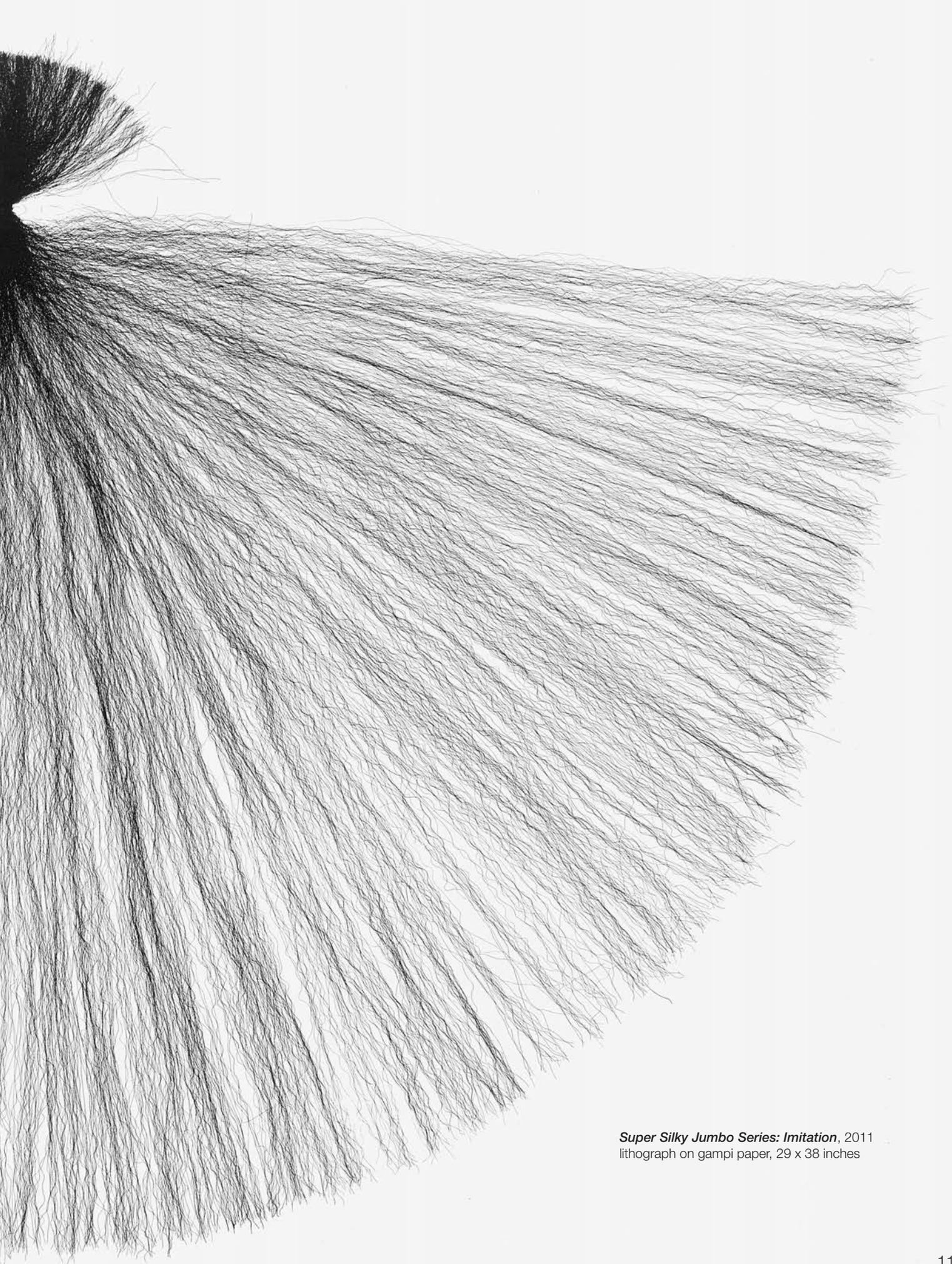
AMP: Much of what I’ve created since then stems from the way I’ve been thinking about the material itself. Synthetic hair is essentially fine nylon fibers made to represent idealized versions of human hair. Its deceptiveness is what I find intriguing, and so indicative of a society that seems obsessed with the superficial. To reveal its false nature, I began melting it with heat and then cutting and reshaping it into various forms and configurations. Examples would include the pieces *Sweet Tooth* and *Hot ‘N’ Gold*, which are meant to be displayed on pedestals, and *#613 Platinum* and *Love Affair*, which can be configured onto walls in various ways.

PB: *Love Affair* has a definite funereal quality. It reminds me of a 19th century hair wreath.

AMP: It’s a combination of looking at that type of work, as well as reacting to the deaths of some older individuals in my family. Quite honestly, I didn’t want

left: *In Her Place*, 2020
manufactured human hair
72 x 72 inches





Super Silky Jumbo Series: Imitation, 2011
lithograph on gampi paper, 29 x 38 inches



above: **Search Perfect Series: Wave**, 2016
lithograph on gampi paper
29 x 39 inches



above: **Search Perfect Series: Envy**, 2016
lithograph on gampi paper
29 x 39 inches



to think about concepts at that time – I just wanted to make things. So I arrived at these through somewhat of a back door.

PB: Let's talk about the hair rug installations, which have become somewhat of a signature aspect of your work.

AMP: These are created using hair clippings cut by hand that are then sifted through lace stencils. The clippings aren't affixed to the surface, so they remain vulnerable to disturbance over time. In some of the more recent ones, I've combined sugar with expensive imported human hair. Both are manufactured products as well as consumer goods, and so they relate to systems of control and imitation. Over time, these installations have moved away from rectilinear configurations to circular, mandala-like shapes. What's fulfilling about this format is how it resolves itself as a continuum.

PB: These sculptural applications of hair are a great complement to the various print series you've created, each referencing and mimicking the seemingly endless universe of artificial hairpieces.

AMP: It's the mimicking that keeps me making the prints, because what does it mean to mimic – it's deceiving, right? Method meets meaning so beautifully this way.

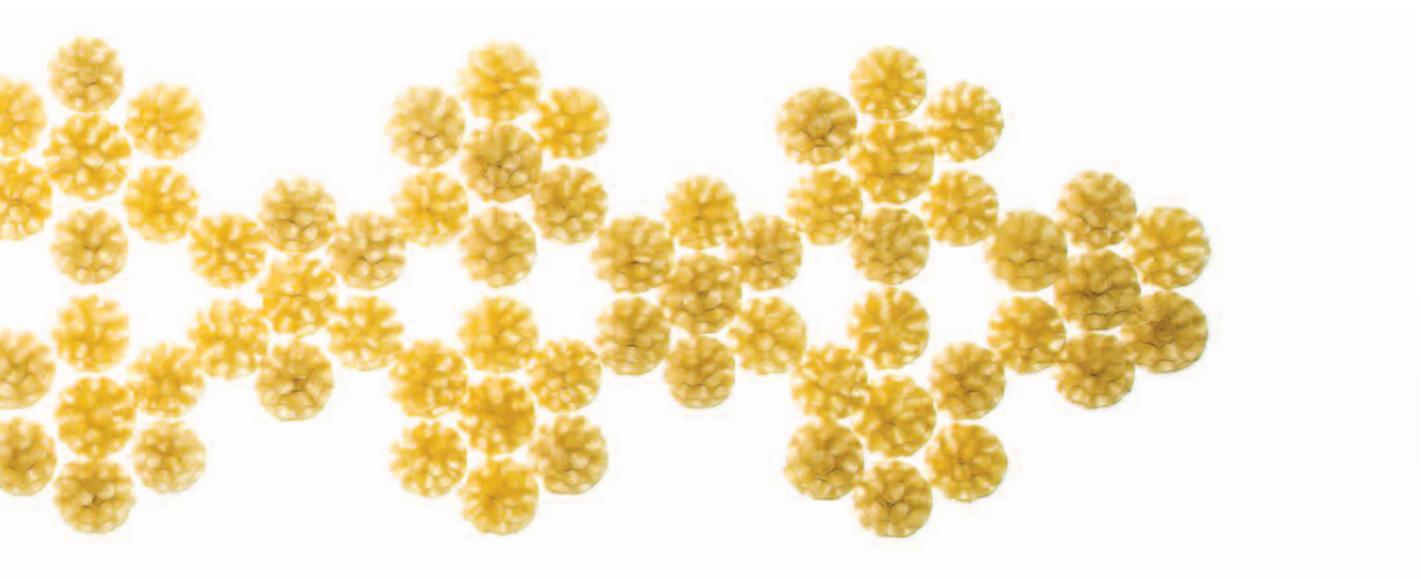
PB: It's interesting that the prints mimic objects which are themselves a deceit.

AMP: I've always been very interested in the element of disguise, mainly because this is often how beauty products work and speaks to the true nature of assimilation. The hair industry offers so many ways to adopt new appearances and identities. As a black woman, I take great pride in this versatility – it's thrilling, but it's also amusing and concerning. Over the past decade, I've tried to reflect these conflicting perspectives in several print series, including *Super Silky Jumbo*, *Ombre* and *Search Perfect*. I create the prints via the process of photolithography. In essence I'm taking a photo exposure to capture the information from the actual object, and then translating it into a print.

PB: Looking at these works, I'm reminded somewhat of Mark Catesby and John James Audubon, whose historical prints focus on individual aspects of the natural world, presented as interesting specimens.

AMP: That's a great observation. Because when you look at my prints you don't wonder what the images are; the experience of looking at the work is more a process of analysis. My desire with these prints is to deceive the eye, so that one will look, and look again, and question whether it's the real thing or not.

above and right (detail):
#613 Platinum, 2008
synthetic hair, glue
48 x 180 inches





above: *Sweet Tooth* (detail), 2012
synthetic hair, glue, 15 x 18 x 18 inches

“My desire with these prints is to deceive the eye, so that one will look, and look again, and question whether it’s the real thing or not.”

PB: You’ve pushed this idea in some of your prints where the imagery has actually become dimensional.

AMP: Yes. This work is more brightly colored, and these elements have a dimensionality and tactility achieved by screen-printing multiple layers on top of each other. In the series titled *Play*, screen-printed elements are added to lithographic images of hair arrangements to look like actual hair ties. I also created several works in which I screen-printed ink in stacked layers, then cut and collaged the images onto the surface to mimic real barrettes and hair pins.

PB: These works have a child-like quality that is appealing. I know that you’ve also recently created headdresses of colorful hair ornaments and photographed them on children. How did these come about?

AMP: I’ve been increasingly thinking about the effects of self-perception in relation to current trends I see in beauty and social media, especially with young girls. For instance, a popular hashtag came out a few years ago, *#blackgirlmagic*. It was intended to encourage and uplift young girls by celebrating women of color who are doing amazing things. But aspiring to “magical” expectations may also become a burden, and so I question the influence that these high expectations can have on younger generations. That concern extends to all black women, who have historically been at high risk for numerous health concerns, both physical and mental.

The Goody Girl series came about in response to the *#blackgirlmagic* hashtag. I made all of the hair accessories, then styled them in a manner similar to the way I constructed the hats I mentioned earlier. In making them, I want to communicate a degree of effort or labor that I associate with beauty maintenance. At the heart of everything I do is a genuine love of work-

ing with my hands, a love for making. It takes many forms, whether I’m working with hair or not.

PB: So you made wearable head forms, then put them on children, posing them in particular ways for the photographs. I don’t see any faces – are they all the same child?

AMP: No, they’re different children, intended to be anonymous. I also wanted them to appear small in terms of their surroundings, so there’s a lot of negative space overhead.

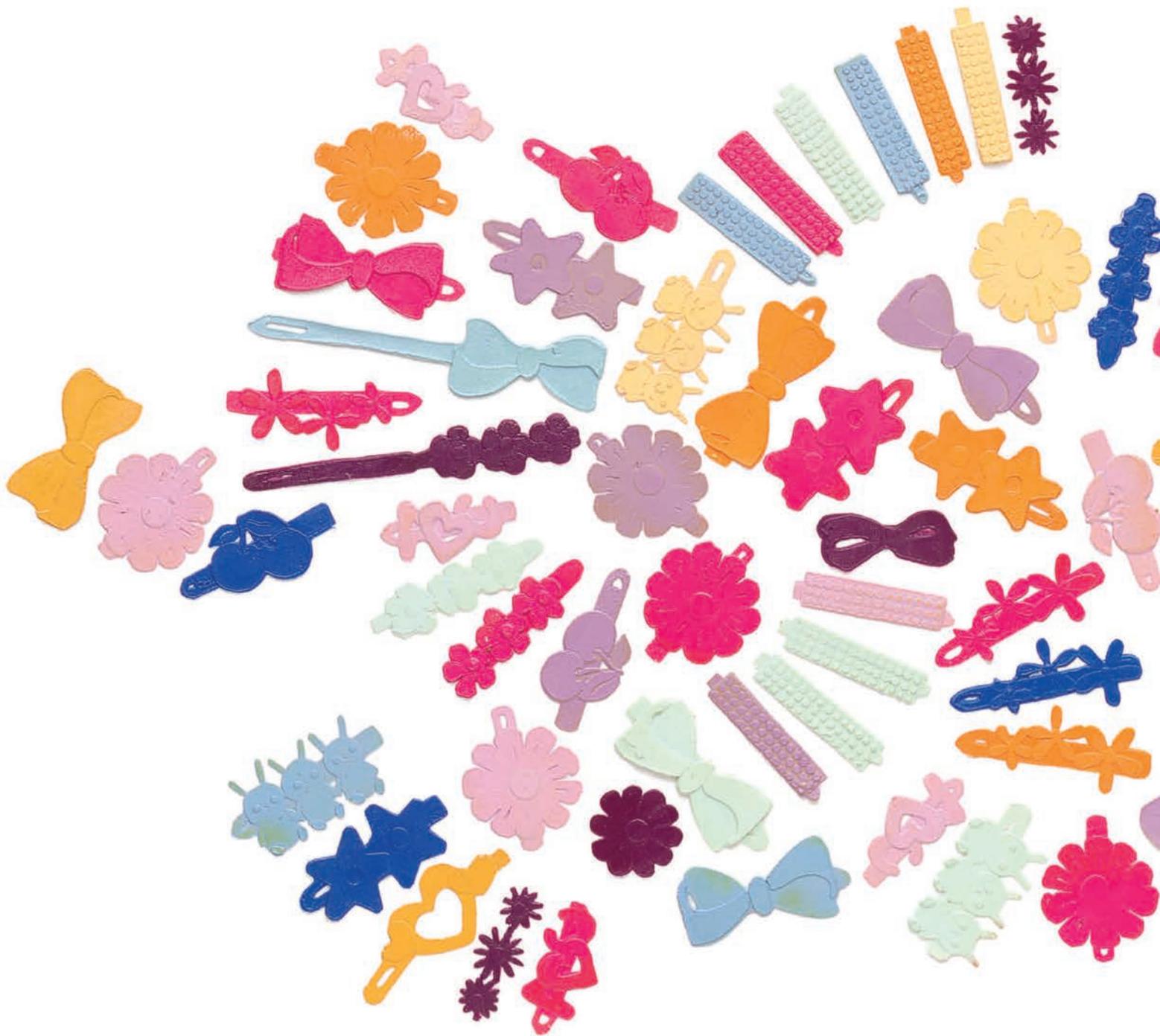
PB: Tell me about your current project, which I understand is an outgrowth of the *Goody Girl* series and involves 3-D printed objects as well as photography.

AMP: I’m sensitive to the multiplicity of issues that surround women and minority communities made to feel marginalized and forced to assimilate to succeed. What’s very much on my mind right now is the idea of how women’s mental health is so strongly influenced by societal expectations delivered via social media platforms. It creates a tireless ritual of examination and re-examination.

My thought for this show is to have a long table-like platform intermixing the array of 3-D elements I’ve been printing lately – which include roses, bows, heart and emoji shapes, as well as syringes, satellite dishes and cellphone towers – combined with photographs of young girls wearing the items in various configurations.

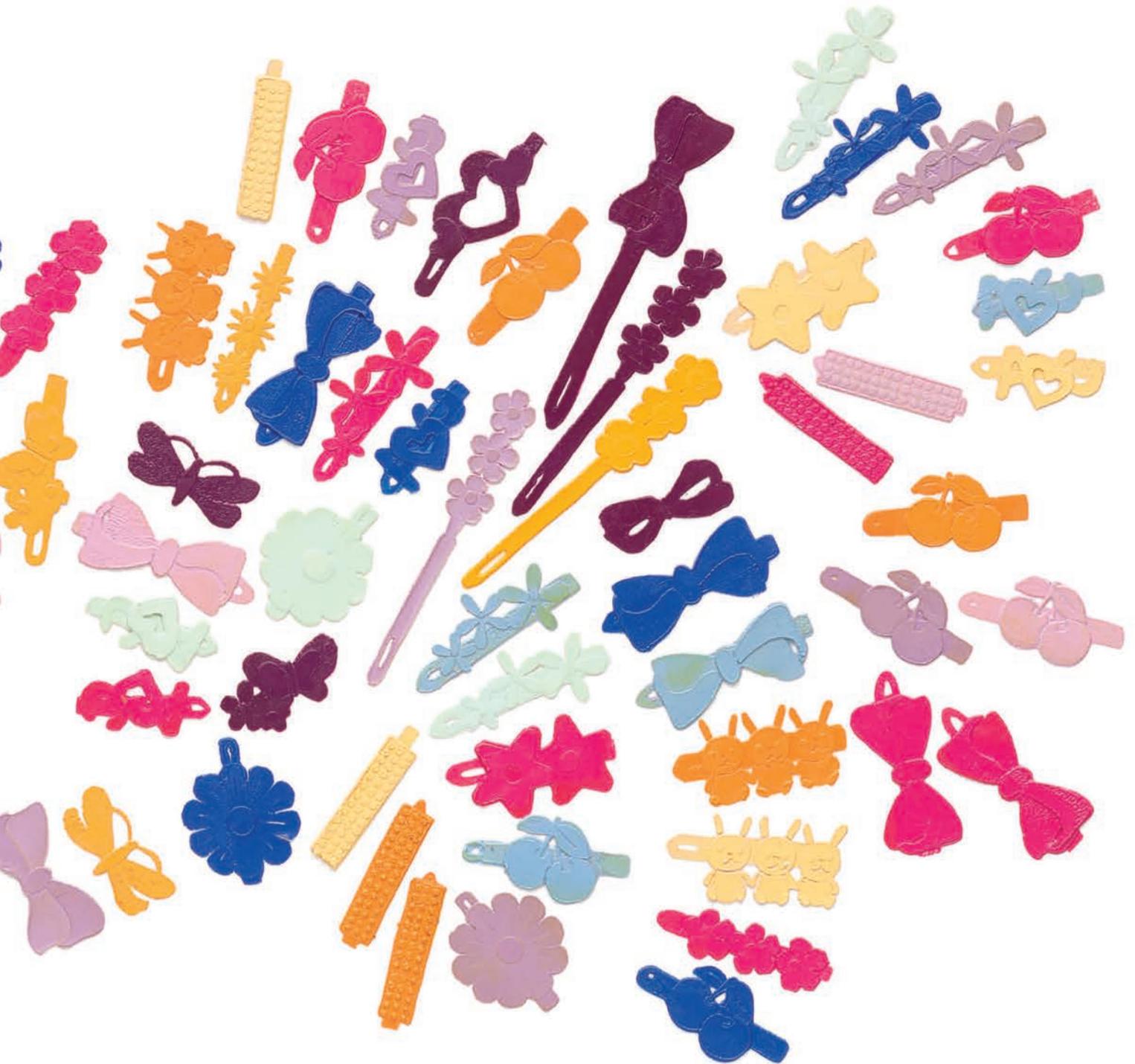
PB: That sounds like an exciting extension of your production. I’m pleased that they will have their debut at the Huntsville Museum of Art.

AMP: I am as well, and I appreciate the opportunity.



above: *Barrettes Series: Barrettes No. 2*, 2017
screenprint, collage, 22 x 30 inches

“I think of myself as a
representational creator –
I like to work from recognizable objects.”





Althea Murphy-Price

born in 1979, San Jose, California

lives in Knoxville, Tennessee

- 2001 BA Studio Fine Arts, Spelman College, Atlanta, GA
2003 MA Painting / Printmaking, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN
2005 MFA Printmaking, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA
2015 – Present Associate Professor, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN
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Selected Recent Exhibitions

- 2021 *TEXTURES: The Art and History of Black Hair*, Kent University Museum, Kent, OH
- 2020 *Works by Althea Murphy-Price*, Auburn University, Auburn, AL
- 2019 *Detachable*, University of Dallas, Irving, TX
Making (It) Work, California College of the Arts, Oakland, CA
Prints by Althea Murphy-Price, University of West Virginia, Morgantown, WV
- 2018 *Salon Time: Sonya Clark, Althea Murphy-Price, Nontsikelelo Mutiti*, The Union for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE
Search Perfect (solo exhibition), Central Library of Cantabria, Santander, Spain
Unreal Expectation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
93rd Annual International Exhibition, The Print Center, Philadelphia, PA

- 2017 *Ink & Imagery*, Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC
Residual, Eyedrum Gallery, Atlanta, GA
- 2016 *Contemporary Lithography*, Museum of Lithographic Art, Tidaholm, Sweden
Her/Hair, Spalding University, Louisville, KY
Truly, George Fox University, Portland, OR
- 2015 *Select Works: Althea Murphy-Price*, South Dakota University, Vermillion, SD
Tucson National Print Invitational 2015, Davis Dominguez Gallery, Tucson, AZ
- 2014 *Contemporary Focus 2014: Jean Hess, Althea Murphy-Price, Jessica Wohl*, Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, TN
Route 66: Westbound to Paradise, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA
Superficial Details (solo exhibition), Turcin Art Center, Boone, NC

Honors / Awards

- 2017 *Visiting Artist*, Arrowmont School of Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN
- 2016 *Visiting Artist*, George Fox University, Portland, OR
Visiting Artist, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC
- 2013 *Artist Residency*, Venice Printmaking Studio International Workshop, Venice, Italy

Museum / University Collections

- Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, GA
Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO
Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA
Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN
Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA
University of Akron, Akron, OH
University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI

For further information, visit altheamurphyprice.com



above: Althea Murphy-Price, Knoxville, TN, December 2020
Photo: Bruce Cole

back cover: *Play Series: Candy Necklace*, 2015
lithograph, screenprint, collage, 22.5 x 30 inches

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