

Laurel Beckman has been making, what she calls, “public” and “wall” works throughout her career. These parallel practices inform her unique voice. Years of making site-specific murals, window displays, bus bench ads, posters, and conceptual walking maps have led to an understanding of how we encounter images, digest them and make them our own. By using these modes of public display, Beckman makes her sentiments accessible, her dialogue public and her personal expression political. These democratic ideals have their roots in her background in artists’ multiples when artists were questioning the insularity of the gallery system. During that time, a lot of artists felt the streets were the only real place to address social concerns. But Beckman flips this assumption around by bringing a concern for intimacy outdoors in “public” works and for shelter indoors in her “wall” works.

The Biggest Seed Fruit Nut in the World is a series of three thematically related digital drawings and collages that embrace the visual pleasure of decoration while poking fun at our domestic fantasies. I will refer to these as the Building Diptych, the Wall Paper, and the Palm Fort series.

The Building Diptych is like a master shot in a film. It establishes a story that unifies the range of strategies Beckman uses throughout this current body of work. Mixing decorative abstraction with juxtaposed collage elements this diptych is equal parts psychedelic poster and architectural rendering. On the left, the patterning of the Wallpaper series ripples like the special effects that transition a sitcom hero into fantasy. Is this the result of a coconut concussion? The falling cartoon lady’s utopian dream? Or a promotional billboard for a downtown condo? These two images are formally linked by the deconstructing palm trees in the center of the coconut ring. On a closer look the white skin around the trunk peels away to reveal an inner framework, like the structural rebar of a building, connecting it to the skyscraper and its white background. The mouse drawn circles push the diagrammatic elements further and draw our attention to the red capped figures in both compositions. We wonder who are these people living beneath this commercial monolith? In one hut, Elaine De Kooning, a painter exceedingly poor early in her career, is living comfortably in a

coconut of her own. The geodesic form inside is a link to Buckminster Fuller's vision of efficient and affordable shelter. Across the way a mystery woman sits in a pod chair. An interactive element makes her identity change with the spin of a wheel. The choice of faces, excluding the model from the original 70's ad, are women with strong, public personas - the noted humanitarian Mother Teresa, architectural diva Zaha Hadid, and hostile hotelier Leona Helmsley. These villagers run the gamut from "saint of the streets" to "queen of cruel." Beckman constructed a model for these huts from a coconut, paper and gesso which she then photographed and digitally collaged into her work. This model was inspired by the phenomena of Dome Village, a homeless encampment near Los Angeles that mushroomed up for ten years until it was destroyed for new development. The Building Diptych contrasts the anonymity of wall paper and architectural drawings with vignettes of humans with which we identify. Beckman's compassionate panorama puts her own detached spin on the "urban community" genre - a working class art staple that depicts friendly neighbors looking out tenement windows onto their street. The difference here is that the nuttiness of the collaged images destabilizes any familiar sentimentality.

Anonymous yet familiar, wallpaper silently surrounds us signaling a sense of style. Beckman's Wallpaper series is a sultry meditation on color and form, playing with how our eyes land upon its patterns for moments of reverie. With varying degrees of coolness and warmth, the wallpaper grows brighter and more intense with each seasonal theme. And why shouldn't it change, it's part of our environment too. One can sense the close observation in the drawing of the coconut, the rough texture of its husk, and the tender shape of its leaves. But these fruits' lack of volume and symmetrical composition subvert their organic details. The repeated wallpaper panels make the coconuts dance abstractly like musical notes across a field of colorful vibrations. This kind of interior design aspires to ecstasy, massaging the brain into a trance-like state. While the rules of wallpaper are followed - light motifs, repetition and harmony - the saturated waves of color induce an optical effect, a decorative pattern Victorians feared would push housewives to fevered distraction.

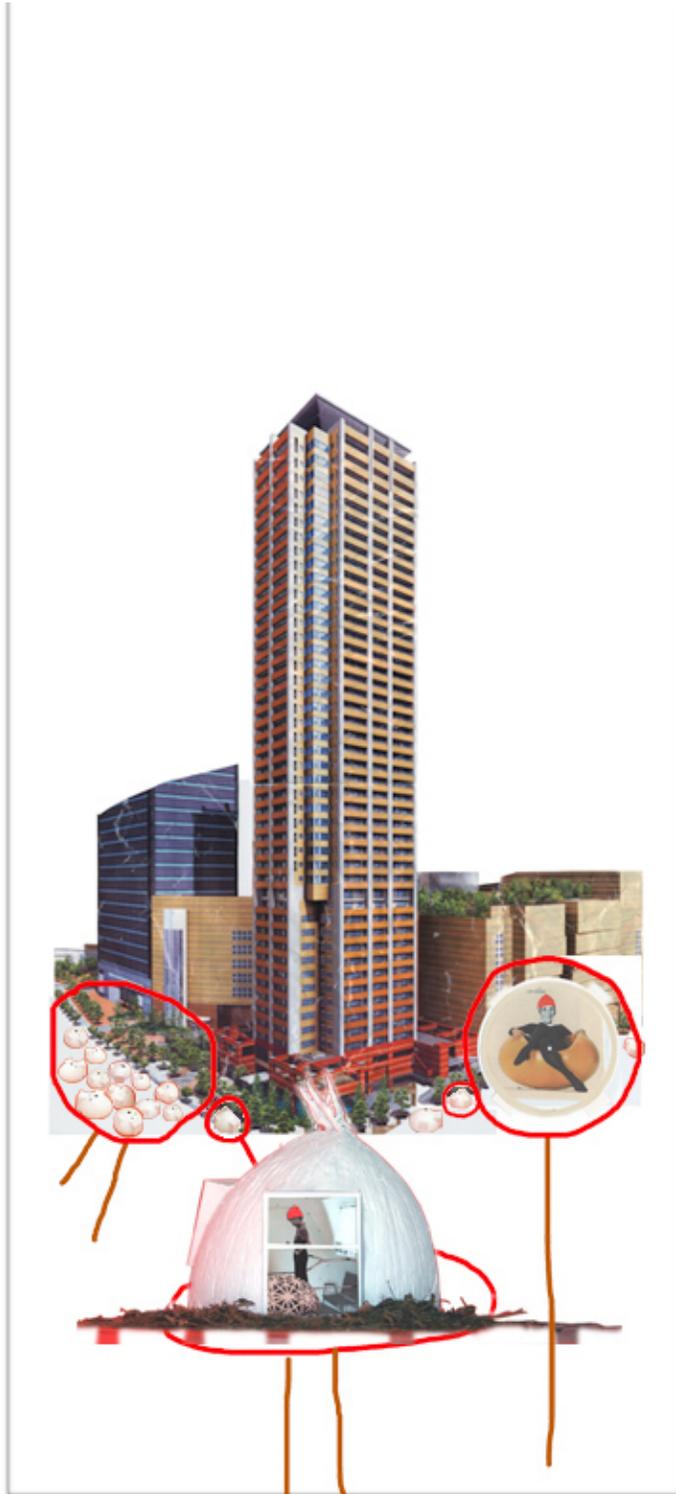
The Palm Forts series also reference domestic interiors. Printed on rice paper and using an Asian palette, these works colors flourish in organic accordance like house plants and still lives. But the luminosity, outlined leaves and symmetrical compositions give this work a kaleidoscopic, stain-glass effect. Some of these have a tropical spiritualism while others use layering for an illusion of greater space. Once we register the patterning of leaves as a framing device, our looking changes as if we were viewing towering high-rises through jungle foliage or an internet search. Is this a scene of some sort of fantastic undergrowth reclaiming the city or the threat of gentrification seen from Third World streets? The verdant plant life around these views feels free in contrast to the modern fortresses behind them. Once this work is safely in our apartments, there is an additional conceptual layer. We find ourselves, depending on our financial mood, outside looking in or longing for our salad days.

It's challenging to work with digital media. We associate it with its commercial use as an information system or a source of entertainment. The appreciation for the medium's nuance and tone is still developing. Beckman's approach has different intensions than many. Her penchant for scientific systems makes her ideas clear, while lessons learned from signage contribute to user-friendliness. The flatness of the screen's grid, the shakiness of the mouse drawn line, and the scrappiness of internet image are wholeheartedly embraced. This confounds any of the slickness associated with the medium. But her use of collage with these techniques leads to abstract thinking. What's fascinating is how these disparate elements breathe together in her compositions, the warmth of her hand and the awkwardness of the machine married in a naïve elegance. This undermines any of the pretensions for cool perfection and virtual realisms that dominate digital media and sucks the atmosphere out of our natural spaces.

Laurel Beckman uses the digital medium's language of fantasy in ways that reflect our social reality. One aspect of this reality is how capitalism no longer manufactures goods but fantastic needs. This challenges artists to make relevant products in a time when many manufactured needs have no basis in reality. At a time when virtual space is growing, the real need for affordable physical space

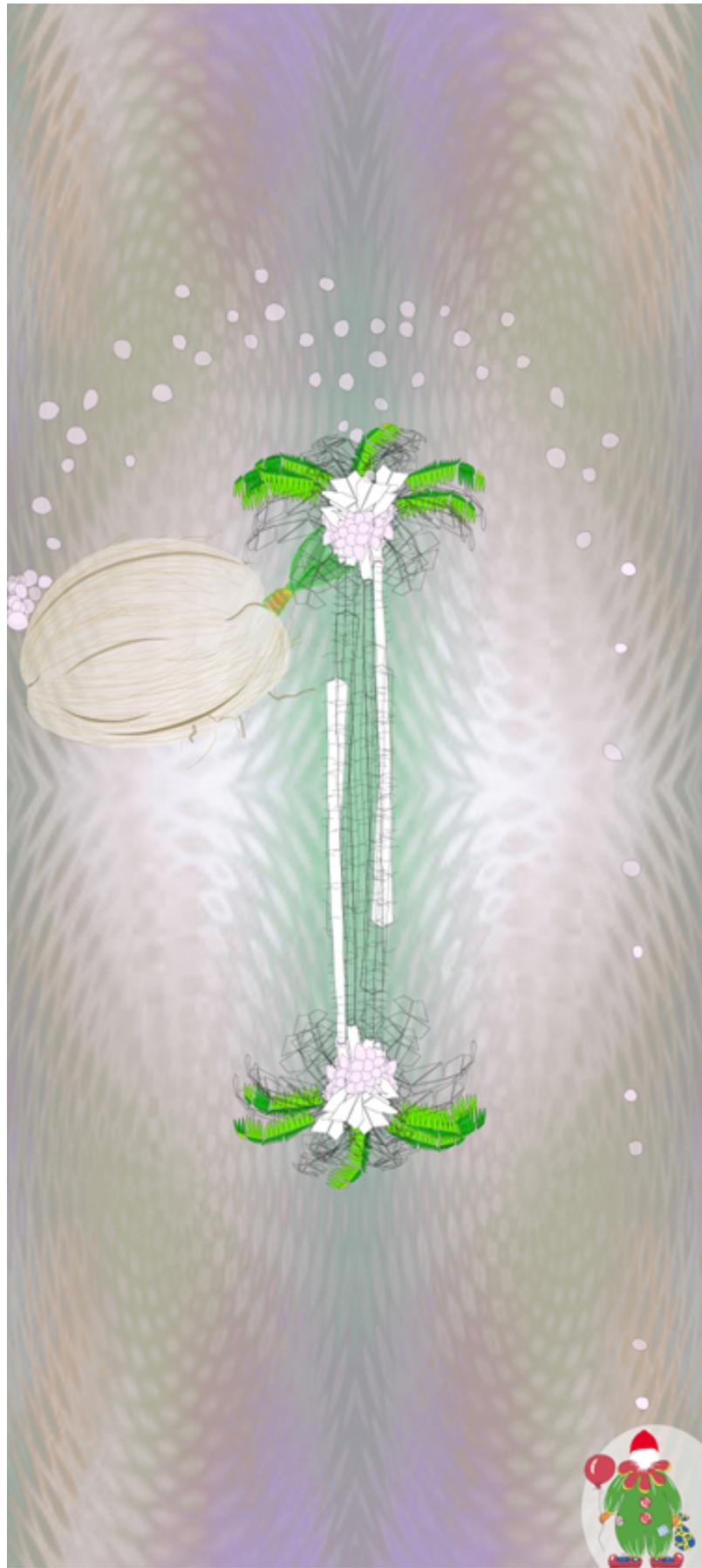
dwindles. What's left are domestic fantasies of home ownership that move artists away from big cities so that they can maintain their dreams of being middle class. Beckman's fantasy of building make-shift housing out of giant coconut shells is satiric to say the least, especially in the context of the world's wealthiest nation. And though I've placed Beckman's work in the context of our current social reality, her intentions are generous, full of color, movement and fun. And like a daydream, it allows us to escape for a moment only to return us changed. What makes this work optimistic is that it hopes to make a change for the better while still retaining its honesty.

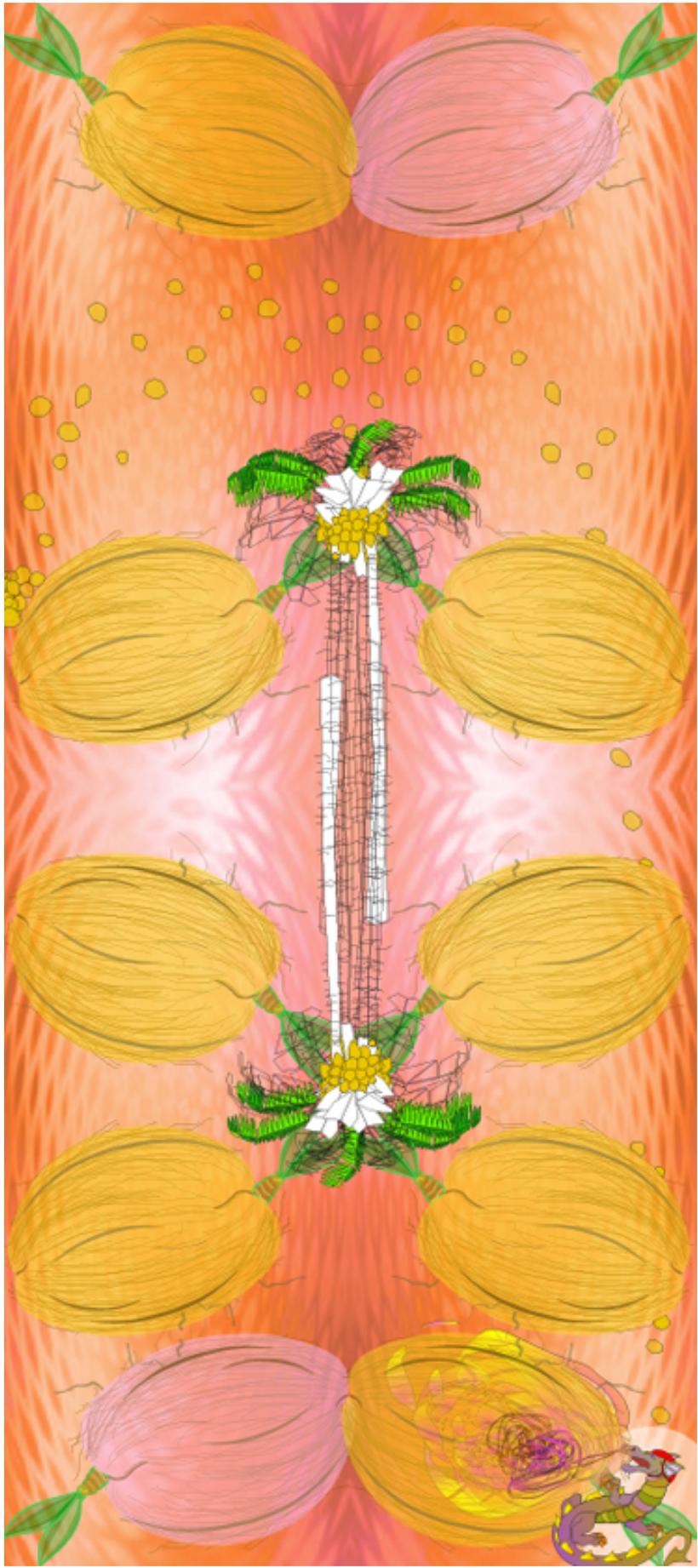
Ryan Hill
Curatorial Research Associate,
Manager of Interpretive Programs
Smithsonian Institution
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

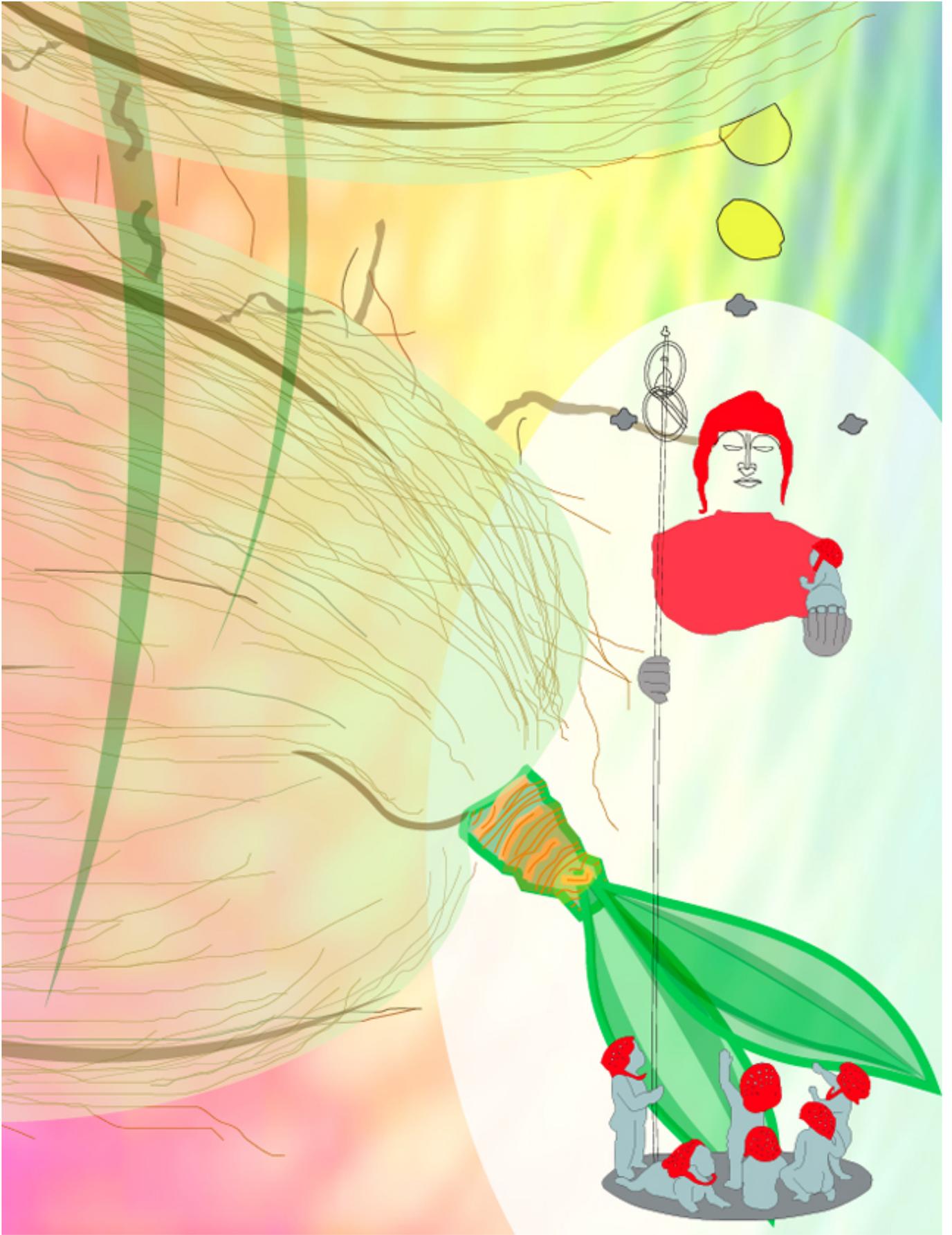






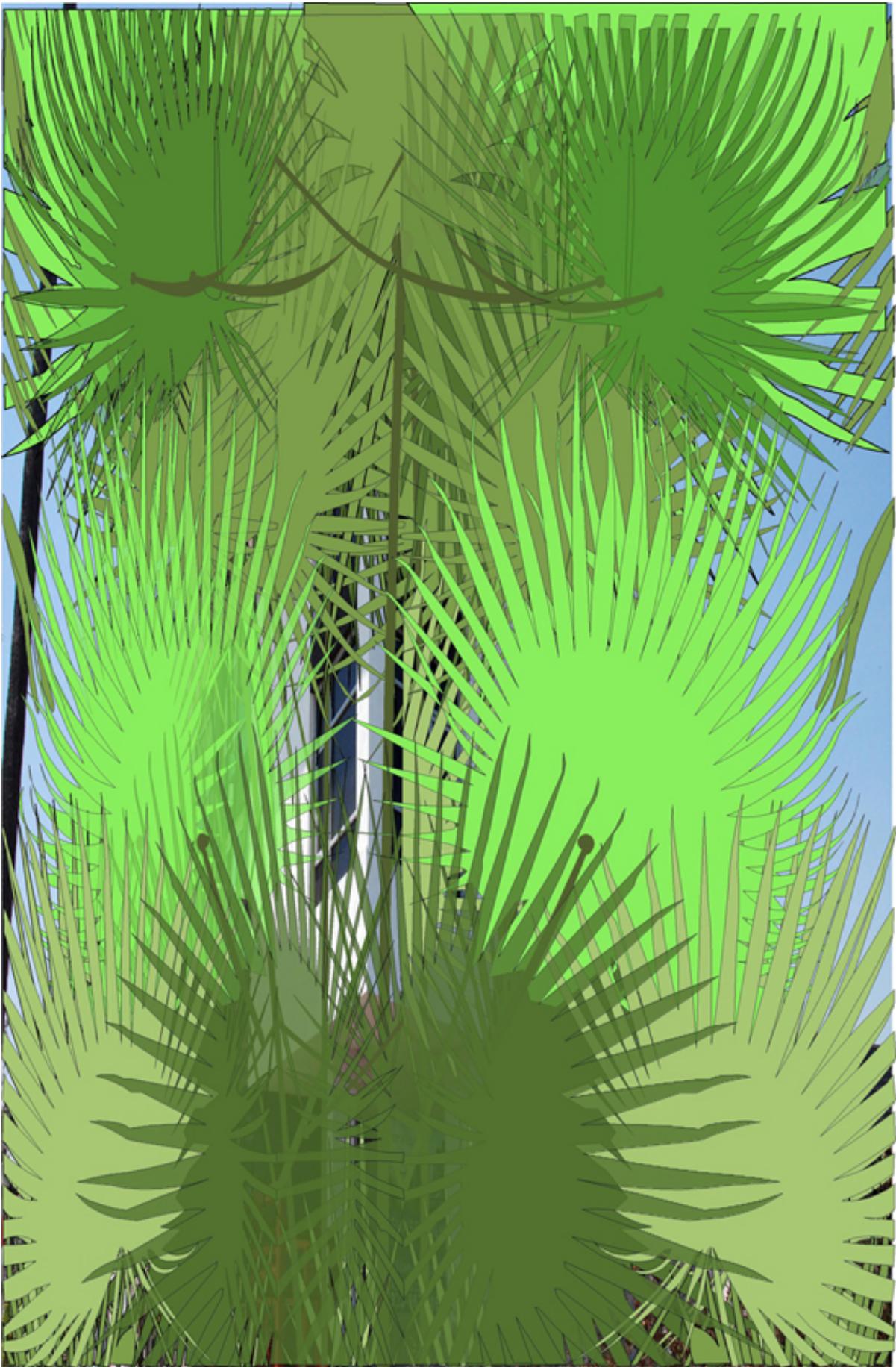






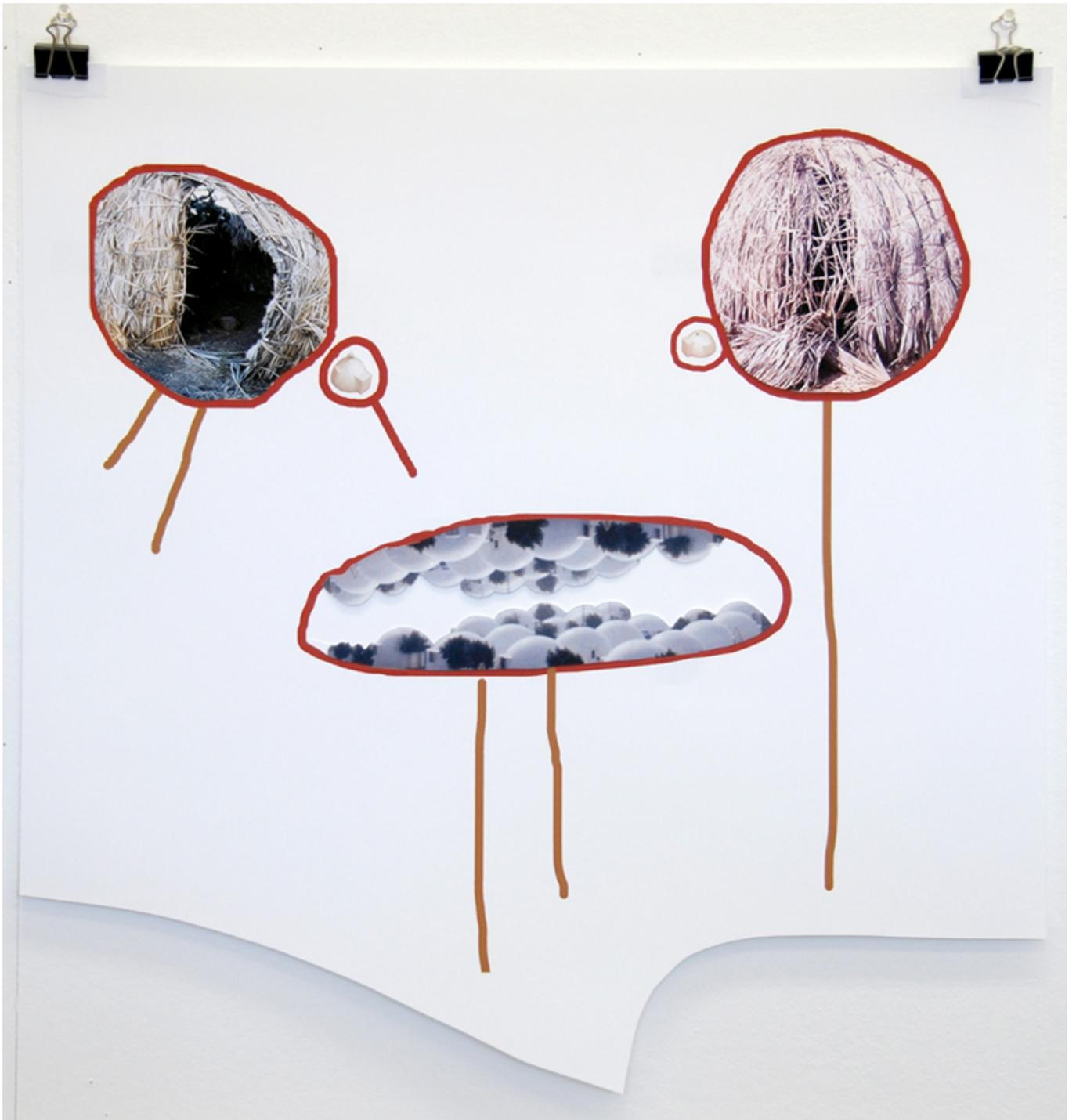




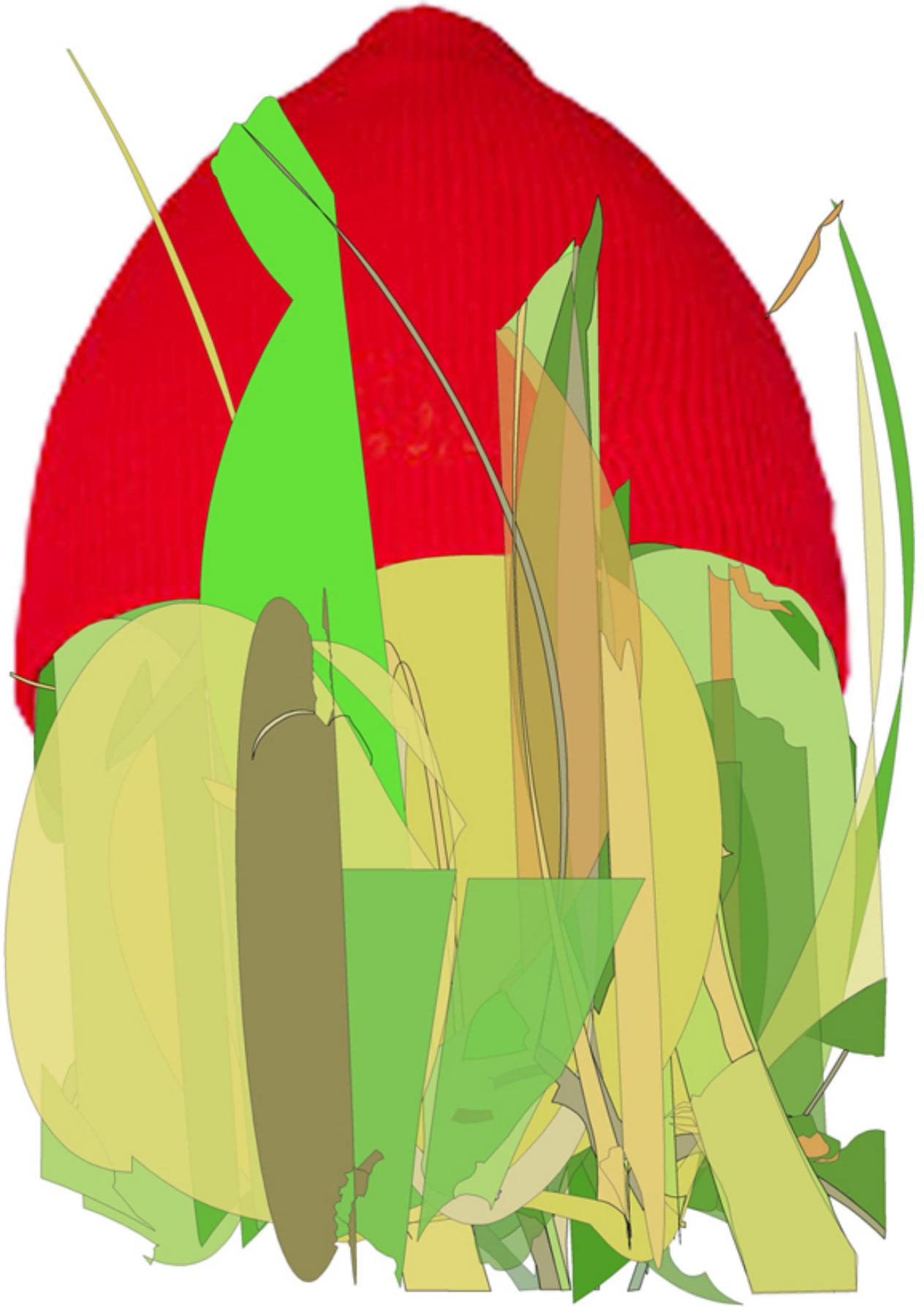














REST AREA: A hang



