

DESIGNING INTENTIONALLY

COLOR PSYCHOLOGY IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

SAVANNAH JONS | HONORS RESEARCH PROJECT



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ARTIST STATEMENT

As a designer, I have always been drawn to bold, diverse color palettes in my work. I love how color has the power to elevate and bring new life to an overall design. This deep appreciation for color led to an even deeper curiosity to understand *why* color has so much influence on design.

Throughout my research for this project, I sought to answer questions such as *“Why do specific colors make us feel a certain way?”*. By answering these questions, my hope was to uncover how color could manipulate messaging, and influence our interpretation of design to push my understanding of color as simply an aesthetic choice, but as a critical and essential tool in design.

PROJECT ABSTRACT

This project explores how color is more than an aesthetic tool in graphic design and marketing. Color plays a key role in influencing the *tone* of design. This study seeks to understand the visual language of color in design and researches how color psychology influences the interpretation of graphic design. The aim of this project is to show designers how color should be intentionally used and studied to leverage design and can be used to communicate messaging more clearly.

Within the design portion of this project, 8 posters (displayed as a set of 4, double-sided) were designed, with each set having the exact same design, and the only difference being a shift in color palette. These designs explore how color influences a *shift in interpretation* of the messaging of the posters, and experiments with how these color shifts could even be used to change the meaning of phrasing as well.



PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

It can be argued that **color is a visual language**, guiding our perceptions and influencing the tone of what we see around us. The field of color psychology studies the symbolism of color and seeks to understand the relationships between color and its neurological and psychological impact.

While studying the interpretation of color, it must be acknowledged that there is a level of color perceptiveness that is subjective to the individual. Rudolf Arnheim quotes, **“No one will ever be sure that his neighbor sees a particular color exactly the same way he himself does.”**¹ While several individuals could be observing the exact same color, how they react to that color is unique to the individual based on preferences, personal experiences, cultural implications and more. With that being said, it is worth noting that through this exploration of color, it can never be precisely predicted how an individual will

respond to a color or set of colors because of the subjective factors. We can make a generalized assumption about how a color will be perceived, while taking into consideration that this will not be the case for every individual due to these extraneous variables. Italian psychotherapist Luca Coladarci explains that **“a fundamental characteristic of colours (just as for any other symbol) is the rule of opposites, according to which a single shade may have the opposite value, positive or negative, light or dark, according to the setting and the psychic situation in which it is inserted.”**² The meaning of color is not “fixed” or inherently defined by one singular meaning. The environment in which the color is associated with also plays an important role in how color is interpreted.

However, Rudolf Arnheim argues that despite the subjectivity of color **“it is safe to state that color perception is the same for people of different ages, different backgrounds, or different cultures.”**¹

The suggestion is that there is a *general connection* of color aside from personal experience, based on psychological wiring.

An example of this general color connection can be viewed through temperature in color. **“Our reactions to physical chill or warmth are obviously similar. In the same way, warm colors seem to invite us whereas cold ones keep us at a distance. Warm colors are outgoing, cold ones draw back.”**¹ We typically view colors that contain cool tones as more professional

and calm, primarily within lighter blue and green tones. On the other side of the scale, warmer toned colors such as reds, oranges, and yellows are perceived as more inviting or energetic.

While researching color psychology and color perception, I also studied the interactions of colors with one another.

An artist who deeply explored and wrote a book on this concept was Josef Albers. In his book, Albers went into depth on how color shifts in relativity to one another, particularly in relation to painting techniques and materials. **“Our concern is the interaction of color; that is, seeing what happens between colors.**

We are able to hear a single tone. But we almost never (that is, without special devices) see a single color unconnected and unrelated to other colors. Colors present themselves in continuous flux, constantly related to changing neighbors and changing conditions.”³ When paired next to one another, particular colors can shift in shade or overall tone. This shift is also known as *simultaneous color contrast* which occurs because color is being perceived not in isolation, but in relation with its surrounding colors. For example, a mid-tone grey could be perceived as warmer when paired next to a red color and cooler when paired next to a blue color.

Following my research, I concluded that color is both universal among audiences and personal to the individual. Meaning behind color decisions in graphic design should be considered based not just on the color itself, but in tandem with the design layout and messaging context. These research insights informed the following study and was used as the framework to develop designs meant to be manipulated by color.

¹ Arnheim, Rudolf. *Art and Visual Perception, Second Edition: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. University of California Press, 1974.

² Zuffi, Stefano. *Color in Art*. Abrams, 2012.

³ Albers, Josef. *Interaction of Color, 4th Edition, 1963, Reprint, Yale University, 2013.*



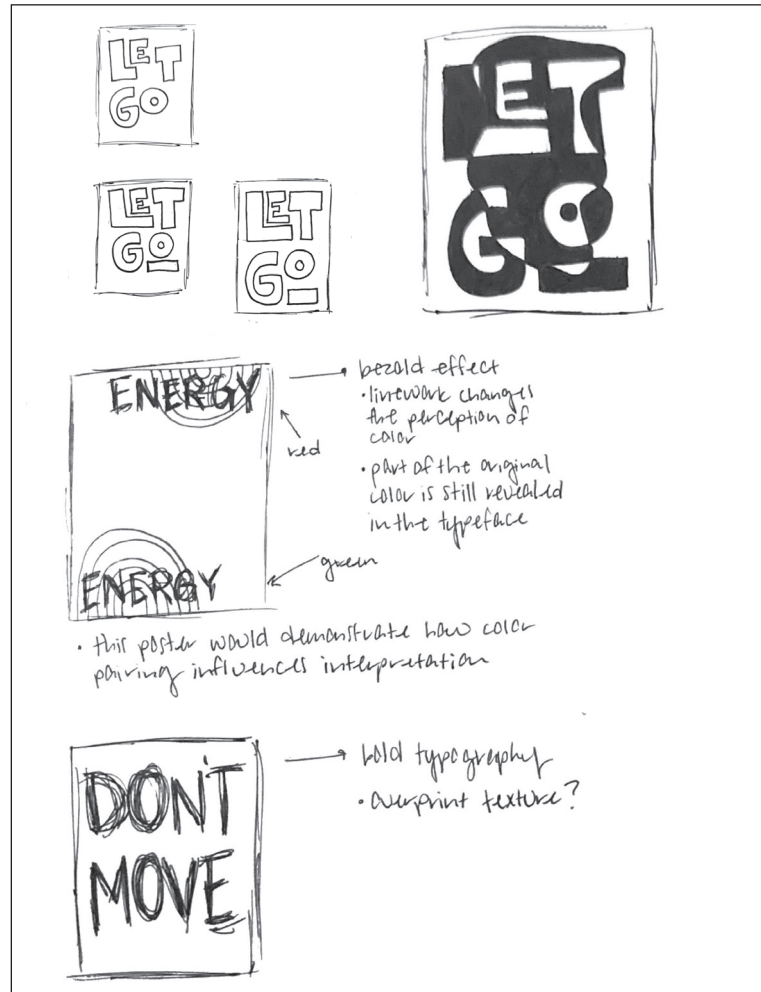
DESIGN PROCESS

I began my design process by brainstorming neutral messaging that could be perceived in either positive or negative tones based on color selections.

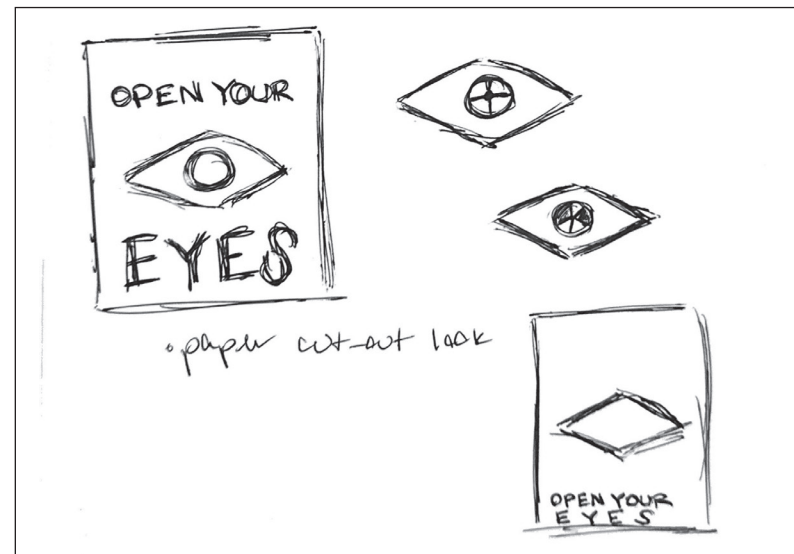
Once I had settled on a few phrases, I began thumbnail sketching to explore how the messaging could look visually.

After narrowing down which sketches had the most potential, I moved to a digital format working on developing initial rough drafts of the poster designs. All of these posters were designed to an 18" x 24" format and used primarily Adobe Indesign, Adobe Photoshop, and Adobe Illustrator.

At this point in the design process, I worked with my Honors Research Project Sponsor to get feedback on the look and feel, as well as to gain insight on the shifts in color. I then applied this feedback and worked back-and-forth with my Sponsor to make revisions until the final designs were developed. During the revision phase of this process, I also spoke with my Project Readers to get their input on the designs.



Initial poster sketch thumbnails and ideation.



POSTER SET #1: ROUGHS



POSTER SET #1: REFINEMENT



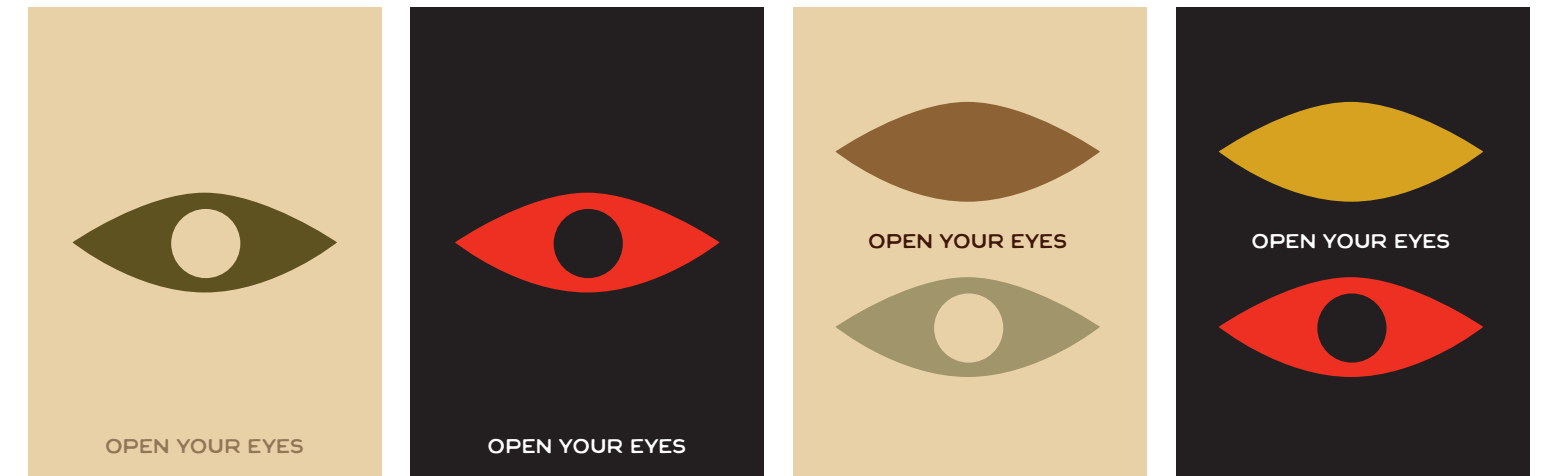
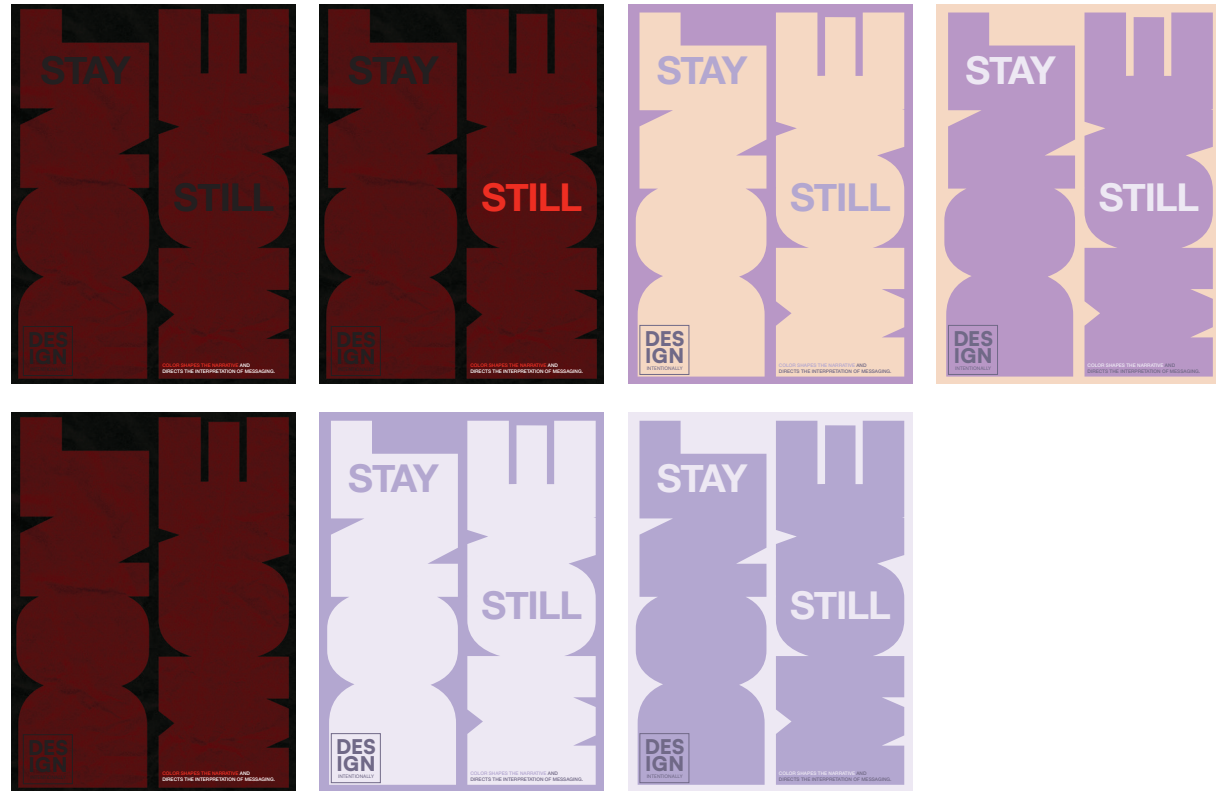
POSTER SET #2: ROUGHS



POSTER SET #2: REFINEMENT



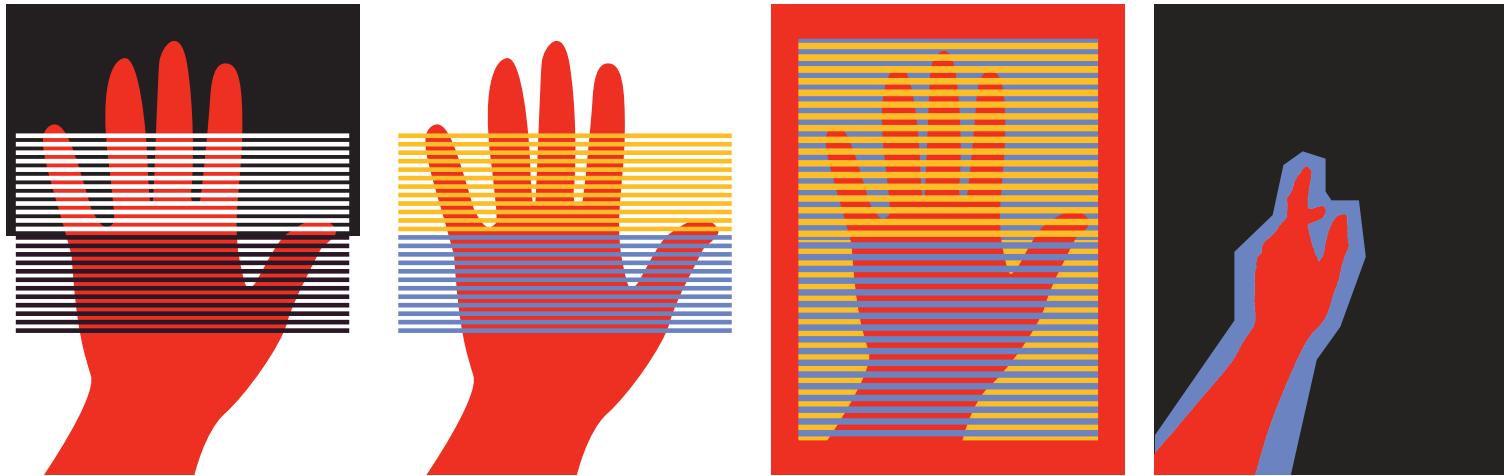
POSTER SET #3: ROUGHS



POSTER SET #3: REFINEMENT



POSTER SET #4: ROUGHS



POSTER SET #4: REFINEMENT



FINAL DESIGNS

POSTER SET #1



FRONT

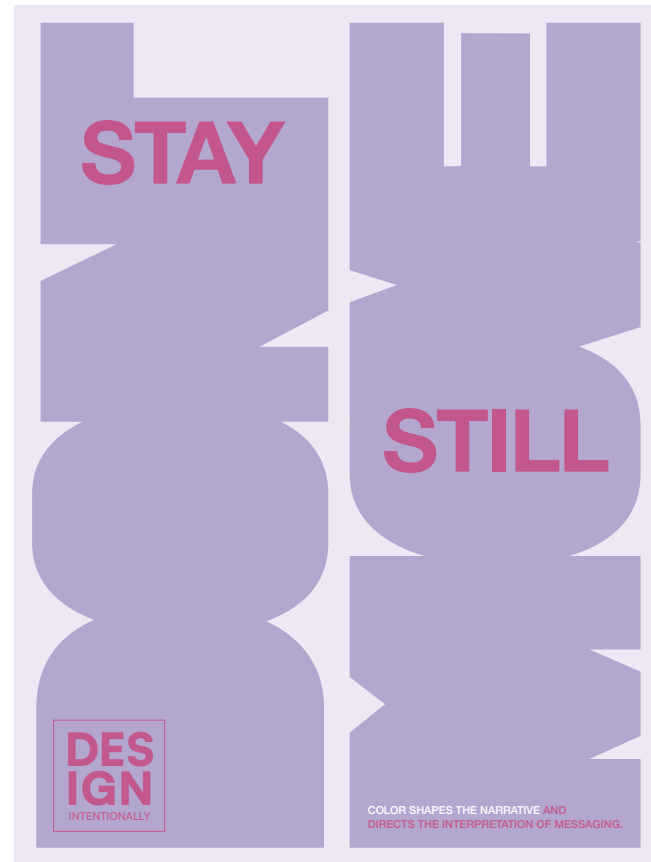


BACK

POSTER SET #2



FRONT



BACK

POSTER SET #3



FRONT



BACK

POSTER SET #4



FRONT



BACK

DIDACTIC DESIGN





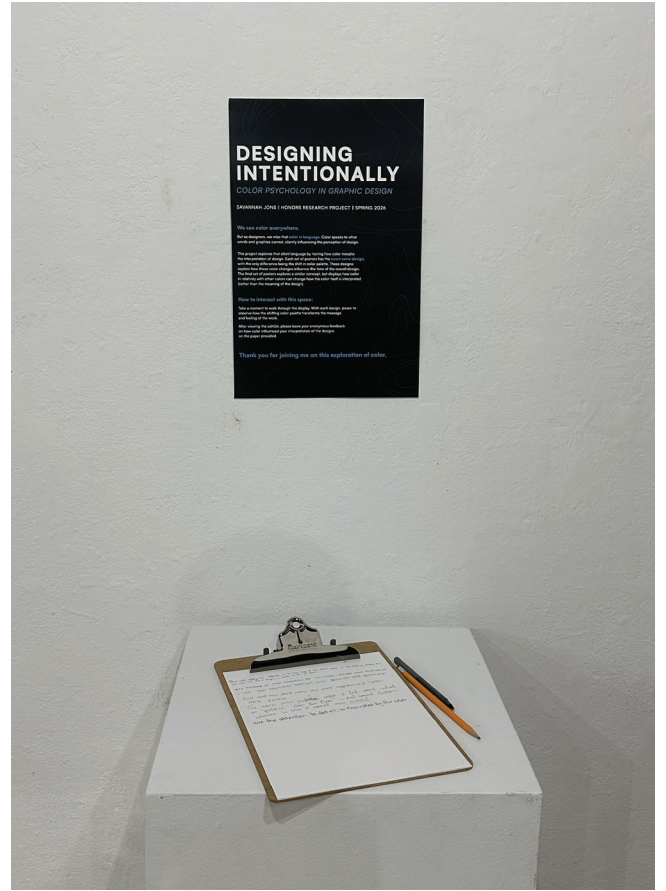
FINAL EXHIBIT

For this exhibition space, I wanted to allow viewers to *interact* with the environment rather than just view the designs. In order to accomplish this, I arranged the posters in alignment horizontally and hung them from the gallery space ceiling, with enough room in between each poster for viewers to walk around and experience the designs. In doing this, my goal was for there to be enough pause in between each poster for viewers to take in each color option and experience the shift in color when walking around the designs.

On the opposite wall of the gallery space, I hung my project statement for viewers to gain an understanding of the explorations in color psychology. I also provided a space for viewers to write down their anonymous response to the color shift, to gather feedback on how the shift in color distorted the interpretation of the design messaging.



The poster designs were exhibited in the Emily Davis Gallery Projects Gallery space in the Myers School of Art building.





PROJECT REFLECTIONS

As part of this exhibition, I provided an opportunity for viewers to leave their anonymous feedback on how they perceived color within the works and how the shifting color palettes influenced their interpretation of the design messaging. From that feedback, the overall view was that the posters that incorporated a darker color palette appeared more aggressive, dystopian and radical, while the posters that used lighter and softer color palettes appeared more gentle and artistic.

In reflecting on the feedback received, I believe that the shift in color was successful in influencing the perception of messaging. If I were to recreate this research exhibition, I would have asked more specific questions for viewers to anonymously reply to, to garner more specified feedback to the messaging responses.

In researching color psychology and practicing the application of it, I learned a lot about the impact of color. I was surprised by the deep psychological connection of color perception. Prior to this project, it hadn't occurred to me how impactful color could be from a psychological approach, rather than simply as an aesthetic tool used to amplify design. Going forward, I plan to apply this knowledge to my own design work, by tailoring choice in color based on desired viewer response.

A FINAL THANK YOU

I would like to give a special thank you to those who supported me throughout this project.




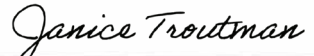

Thank you to my Project Sponsor, **Brittyn Murdock**, for your encouragement and for pushing me to think bigger and bolder.

Thank you to my Project Readers, **David Flynn** and **Tony Samangy**, for your investment and feedback on this project.

Finally, thank you to my Project Advisor, **Dr. Elisha Dumser**, for your guidance and commitment to assisting this project.

Thank you all.

SIGNATURES

Approved:	Accepted:
 _____ Honors Project Sponsor (signed)	 _____ Honors Faculty Advisor (signed)
BRITTYN MURDOCK 2.26.26 _____ Honors Project Sponsor (printed) Date	Elisha Dumser 2/26/2026 _____ Honors Faculty Advisor (printed) Date
 _____ Honors Project Reader (signed)	 _____ Department Chair (signed)
DAVID FLYNN 2.26.26 _____ Honors Project Reader (printed) Date	Janice Troutman 2/26/2026 _____ Department Chair (printed) Date
 _____ Honors Project Reader (signed)	
ANTHONY J. SAMANGY 2/26/2026 _____ Honors Project Reader (printed) Date	

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