Between the Garden and the Gardener

Sara Lynne Lindsay
Brigham Young University

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Between the Garden and the Gardener

Sara Lynne Lindsay

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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Department of Art
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Between the Garden and the Gardener

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Master of Fine Arts

My work uses plant material and soil as a record of personal, cultural, and ecological history. History is not only held in the buildings and monuments, but in the soil itself. I gather this soil and foliage from both cultivated and uncultivated locations for my artwork. Using traditional domestic techniques of drying and canning, I preserve the materials that I have gathered. These will then be sewn together, cooked, and encrusted into objects. Despite my labor of preserving, these organic art supplies are transient. When made into works of art, they can be viewed in their vulnerable state, fighting against time, as they decay.

Keywords: art, sculpture, installation, craft, collect, preserve, glean, flowers, foliage, place, sewing, sowing, soil, plants, ground, drying, canning, decay, generations, cycles, nurture, environment, memory, garden, gardening, gardener
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Introduction

Between the Harris Fine Arts Center and the BYU Museum of Art grows a flowering hibiscus tree. When the flowers are in full bloom, they detach from the branches. On the ground, surrounding the tree can be found various mollusks and insects eating those flowers. These delicate botanical instruments nurture the ground from which they sprang. I saw this circle of labor (from the tree), consumption (by the insects) and decay (to the earth) as a circle of nurturing that women have been engaged in, from the creation. Pondering on this caused me to consider how those who came before me have nurtured me and how I am nurturing the future.
Methodologies

Domestic

In the essay, “Five, Six, Pick Up Sticks/Seven Eight Lay Them Straight,” Richard Long said, “I like common materials, whatever is to hand, but especially stones. I like the idea that stones are what the world is made of.”¹ Like Long, I use materials that are already within my domain to create my artwork. These things include materials found in nature, but I also have a reservoir of skills developed as a homemaker and mother. This is also an important resource that I draw from to create my work.

Speaking about the education of women at home, writer Lucy Lippard said, “The less privileged she is, the more likely she is to keep her interests inside the home with the focus of her art remaining the same as her work.”² My studio is an extension of my kitchen, laundry room, garden, and sewing room. I gather raw materials and transform them through these domestic skills. Though Lippard was commenting with a negative tone towards homemakers and poverty, I unashamedly embrace the work learned from caring for my home and family into my art. These skills have informed my art making and given me the ability to use my talents.

In the essay “Something from Nothing,” Lippard states:

Rehabilitation has always been women’s work. Patching, turning collars and cuffs, remaking old clothes, changing buttons, refinishing or recovering old furniture are all the

traditional private resorts of the economically deprived woman to give her family public
dignity.\textsuperscript{3}

The act of making something from very little resonates with me. Choosing to stay at
home to raise six children on a modest single income, I have learned to use the materials that I
have on hand. I particularly appreciate the thrift and industry derived from producing materials
from the garden. I incorporate them into my work to create something new. Marisa Merz, the
only noted woman in the Arte Povera movement, would often take materials from nature, or
simple domestic activities, and would incorporate these into her art without creating distinctions
of artistic hierarchy. She saw that these two things together could make a new understanding of
the gesture itself. This kind of activity was exciting for her. Regarding this idea, Merz said,

\begin{quote}
It’s not that roses are an element of nature for me. It’s an invention of the mind. […] It’s
that I like roses because they’re beautiful: I can wash a glass with the same feeling. It
would be bad news if I were to consider washing it something dull and pointless, because
that would lead me to hierarchical orders. No way! They are all our gestures, one of all
the possible ones done by us.\textsuperscript{4}
\end{quote}

One of the important skills that I have learned is preserving food. As a mother to six
children, I became very resourceful with any abundance we received. When someone in my
neighborhood had a fully ripe, unattended fruit tree, I would knock on their door and ask if I
could glean from that tree. I would can, dry, or make fruit leather out of the gathered food. I
developed a habit of noticing trees whose gifts were being unused. I am always looking to the

\textsuperscript{3} Lucy R. Lippard, “Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women’s ‘Hobby

\textsuperscript{4} Hans Ulrich Obrist, “I Learned Enormous Things: Hans Ulrich Obrist Remembers
Marisa Merz (1931-2019),” \textit{Frieze}, August 8, 2019, https://frieze.com/article/i-learned-
ground for the treasures that are slowly making their way back into the soil. Naturally, these talents that I have learned, as I have served my family, have made their way into my artwork. My studio includes kitchen supplies, dehydrators, burners, pots, pans, and ingredients more common to a domestic sphere, than the traditional paint, pencils, or clay.

Mother and artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, did not divide her two roles of artist and mother, rather, she incorporated domestic labor and maintenance work into her own art. In *Maintenance Art Manifesto*, Mierle Laderman Ukeles stated: “Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art.” She creates a list of maintenance that she considers ‘a drag’ as well as art. “Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, […] watch out- don’t put things in your nose, what shall I wear, I have no socks, pay your bills, don’t litter.” From this manifesto, I understand that Ukeles specifically identifies her domestic actions as valid artwork. Art can be found in labors that are overlooked and undervalued, such as actions that are performed by mothers. Just as in the case of Ukeles work, the domestic activities involved in making my artwork, along with the materials, are of equivalent value to a finished work. In other words, the process of collecting, transforming, and finishing an artwork are each of equal worth to me. The domestic activities involved are just as fluid and temporary as the finished work.

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6 Ukeles, ”Maintenance Art Manifesto,” 220–1.
In my artwork, the act of collecting, preserving, and transforming the organic materials into works of art follows my internal annual rhythms of providing for a family. It takes time to collect and preserve the materials. This collection starts in the early Spring and continues to the end of Fall. I look for the flowers that have fallen to the ground with a desire to save them in one way or another. I understand that the art that I make with these organic materials itself will disintegrate over time. This is a law in nature. There is a fragility of beauty and time in my work. I embrace and welcome the decay that will undoubtably take place.

Figure

Both fabric and clothing are important tools in my work. I create fabrics from plant materials, then cut, sew, fold, or crush them into artworks. My feelings about the fabrics that I create are reflected in this quote by Richard Kalina, “Using cloth is scarcely a neutral art material. Not only does it embrace a range of social signs, but it can also carry the physical imprint of the wearer, the trace of his or her body.”7 The fabric that I make from soil and plants, expresses notions of location, growth, and decay.

Both the fabric itself and the manipulation of that fabric into forms are important for my work. My fabrics are often organized into shapes that, as Kalina says, holds evidence of imprinted bodies. I see these imprinted forms as figures. One of my works that insinuates the evidence of such a body is Pressed (fig. 3).

This work was created using a dress form as an armature to establish the proportions of the human body within the work. Draping cloth fabric over this mannequin, I was able to piece the cloth together into the form of a dress. This dress served as an understructure for the plant material that was placed over it. When the cloth understructure is completed, I covered it with a mixture of dried English daisies and gelatin. This mixture forms a second layer of organic

7 Kalina, “Gee Bend Modern,” 88.
“fabric” on top of the cloth which becomes rigid, retaining the shape of the body underneath. Once this second layer of fabric had dried, the entire form was cut off and detached from the mannequin. This process of detaching the dress from the form which created it reminds me of the process of a tree dropping its flowers to the ground, once their botanical purpose has been served. The beauty still remains in the flowers, along with the imprint of the structure that formed them. But they are severed from that structure that gave them form. Once removed from the dress form, the rigid dress was crushed between two panes of glass, like a pressed flower. This process of crushing the flower/dress often required a great amount of weight to be applied to the glass. Despite the pressure applied to these figures, between the panes of glass remains an imprint of a body, and the stains left from the flowers.

The imprint of the figure in these works can be likened to Ana Mendieta’s Sihueta Series (1973–1980). She looked to the earth as a literal and symbolic substrate to create the figural cavities in this series of artworks. Using rocks, twigs and flowers she formed silhouettes of her body into the earth. She also did this literally, as she would lie naked on the soft earth trying to forge the form of her body into the earth. “The figural cavity is at once a womb and a grave, and the elements that fill it become surrogate souls whose natural processes point to the cycle of decay and rebirth.”8 The dresses in my work act both as a figure and as a shell, similar to a flower, providing evidence of a form which is meant to return to the earth.

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In this work, the remains of the cavity, formed by the body underneath, is important. It is the expansive pressure that pushes out against the panes of glass which are trying to hold in the body. This form is important in expressing the pressures exerted onto the woman, but the clothing that holds that forms also tells an important part of the story in this work. Curator Julie Sasse said, “Clothing is actually a kind of language, by putting it on the wall and saying it’s art, it’s transformed from a utilitarian item of clothing to something with greater residence.”

I have been inspired by other artists whose work features clothing that has been stripped of its original function, through manipulation and display. An example of this is Allison Janae Hamilton’s *Untitled (three fencing masks)* (2019). Three WWII-era fencing masks are embellished with objects from the landscape of the southern United States: horsehair and feathers. She takes the item’s original function, in this case to protect, and renders it useless through manipulation of the apparel. With the combination of landscape and wearable goods, she is able to create a conversation, focusing on the treatment of Blacks in Europe and the United States during WWII. Place is an important part of this work, as her gathered materials indicate. These are juxtaposed against the items of clothing, which embody a person or people. This combination creates a dialog for her work functioning similarly to my work. In Hamilton’s *Untitled (three fencing masks)*, the items of clothing have been rendered in a way that can no longer be worn. Despite this, a presence is felt even with the absence of a figure.

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Doris Salcedo also represents the figure, through its absence. In her untitled work displayed at the 8th International Istanbul Biennial in 2003, 1,550 empty chairs were stacked and forced between two buildings. These chairs functioned as silent reminders of the people that were part of a forced displacement of Greeks and Jews from Istanbul. The objects in this work are surrogates for the figures that are missing.

Dresses and clothing in my work also have implications for figures. The characteristics of these figures are communicated through the organic material that has stained and encrusted into the clothing, and very often, like Hamilton’s work, the landscape has been woven into them. I use organic materials that has been gathered from local gardens. I harvest, preserve, and encrust this material onto the fabric, marking it with the stains from the pigments and leaving a memory of the land on the clothing. This creates a dialog between the dress and the foliage. Once carefully harvested and preserved, it will now eventually fade over time. An untold amount of labor was required to create the work, which quickly becomes temporary. Hovering in time for a small moment, the work will eventually fade.

In my piece, *Taming the Unruly*, a tattered quilt is folded neatly on the lap of a chair. The quilt squares that make up the fabric are a concoction of dandelion flowers and cottonwood seeds. The only parts not gathered from the ground are thread and pectin, used to bind the organic materials, making it into a workable fabric. It is against the nature of dandelion and cottonwood seeds to be contained. Because they blow in the wind for their survival, this work creates a struggle between the object and the materials which are only held together through the labor of a needle. Both the organic material and the stitching are important for the construction and meaning of this work. My works are united in the stitches. Like brush strokes to a canvas, it is the thread that controls the sculptural form of my artworks. Richard Kalina reflects this in his
statement, “Piecing and stitching have proven to be as sensitive, energetic and direct a means of expression as the most adept brushwork.” The finished quilt rests folded on a dignified, but scuffed, chair. The quilt looks as though it’s beginning to burst open. The work implies a mother and child relationship, the chair embraces the quilt which struggles to remain still.

Quilts have been made by artists to imply many types of family relationships. Faith Ringgold, says of quilts:

> It covers people. It has the possibility of being part of someone forever [. . .] I thought about the quilt I covered myself with in childhood and then again as a young woman. I remember that mama did not understand my need to take that nasty ragged quilt ball the way to college. Yet it was symbolic of my connection [. . .] to home. This quilt is made of scraps. Though originally hand sewn, it has been gone over on a sewing machine so that it would better endure prolonged use. . . this quilt (which I intend to hold onto for the rest of my life) reminds me of who I am and where I have come from.12

Quilting techniques are often passed on from one generation to the next. The workmanship of those mothers and grandmothers, the most conspicuous authors of this labor, is often prized and handed down through families. I own a quilt that was made by my great grandmother, Ada Day Reed. This quilt was made from scraps of old dresses. In the past, it was typical to use the leftover scraps from dressmaking, or old clothes, to make quilts when money was tight. In this quilt, I have a record of her handiwork and her body. A personal and collective history which is woven into that quilt.

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The quilt that I have inherited from my great grandmother has a pattern of cats sewn on it. There is a family legend associated with this antique: Ada had a twin sister Ida. Ida would come over and they would quilt together, working on this blanket. They had so much fun stitching and gossiping. When Ida left, Ada would undo all of Ida’s stitches and replace them with what she deemed as acceptable ones. Bell hooks told of a story of her grandmother:

She [Baba, Sarah Hooks, bell hooks’s grandmother] was eager to teach and instruct, to show me how one comes to know beauty and give oneself over to it. To her, quilt making was a spiritual process where one learned to surrender. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go. This was the way she learned to approach quilt making from her mother. To her it was an art of stillness and concentration, a work which renewed the spirit [. . .] Baba believed that each quilt had its own narrative—a story that began from the moment she considered making a particular quilt.13

Stories of our ancestors can be passed to future generations through quilts. In my work Decomposing Quilt (fig. 8), I stitched together fabric made from plant materials that was gleaned from the locations of my ancestor’s births, deaths, and burials. This labor was performed during a trip that took my family across the country, from Rhode Island to Oregon. Having collected family’s stories about these people beforehand, I shared them with my children as we drove from state to state. In this work of stitching together generations and talking about the people we were finding, I felt that we were like women in a quilting bee: gossiping about our family and tying ourselves to them.

Ground/Soil

Soil is a reoccurring component in my art. In the soil lies a history. Encoded in the ground we can find evidence of things that once lived on this earth. Billions of bacteria, fungi, and microorganisms are present in a healthy sample of soil. It is a continuous cycle of life and death. In dOCUMENTA(13), artist Claire Pentecost said, referring to her installation called soil-erg (2013):

Good soil is alive: structurally and biologically it is a living system. When the soil is maintained in an ecologically sensitive way it not only nurtures plants, it also helps protect against weeds and pests. But it requires continually evolving, site-specific knowledge as well as sustained labor. Good soil is the result of a sustained practice and a practice that is social as much as it is biological.14

Rich soil is made up of humus, the remnants of dead plants and animals and the waste products of living things. This compost mixture of non-living organic material plays a role for the living organisms. It stores water and nutrients for a healthy growing environment for plants as well as creating a soil that is easier to work with, for those that would cultivate it. The nutrients are recycled by the living organisms held within the soil. Each soil sample reflects the unique background of its existence. It is virtually impossible to have the exact characteristics of soil found in two parts of the world. Plants need this unique makeup of nutrients to grow well, to thrive in their environment. These important characteristics of soil are both scientific and symbolic. Anthony Gormley said of soil:

I am very keen on the color—the redness of the clay being something to do with the iron in the earth, which is also the iron in our blood, which somehow makes a connection between flesh and planet. The connection is very important. Field suggests that the earth holds the memory of our ancestors and also the promise of the unborn. It has life, a memory and a conscience [. . .] It’s rooted very deep in our psyche that a god-like figure creates us from the earth and that we return to the earth.15

I often use soil in my work as a symbol to consider the lives that came before me and the ground that they have crafted. Evidence of what was living and found above the soil eventually


makes its way into the ground for the next generation to be nourished by. An untold amount of conditioning, be it emotional, spiritual, financial, and physical, is passed on to me from my ancestors. They have helped to create the person that I am, and the environment from which I sprang. I think of the people who have sacrificed for me, those who were consciously considering the next generation, as well as those who neglected and abused their offspring. Some of my ancestors came from thriving environments, some of them lived in ground which was extremely poor. I am made up of both. I am at a pivotal place in the continuation of creating good or bad “soil” for the generation to come. My actions as a mother affect the environment that I am creating. The act of nurturing those around me, sacrificing, caring and tending to the generations before and after me creates healthy soil, an environment of cultural memory of nourishment of past, future and present.

In the artwork, *Por um Fio (By a Thread)* (1942), the artist Anna Maria Maiolino beautifully unites the history of three generations together. The artists, seated in the middle with her mother on one side and her daughter on the other, are connected at the mouth by a string. Three different origins, Ecuador, Italy, and Brazil are entwined in this thread, showing a map of a life’s trajectory or lifeline. It is a thin, temporal, and fragile line that is connected by love.

In my work, *Decomposing Quilt* (fig. 8), many generations of my ancestors are represented. The materials that I gathered for this work are site specific to my ancestor’s birth or death place. The flowers, leaves, seeds, seaweed, soil, and moss were made into sheets of organic fabric, by combining them with a binder and then dehydrating them into a workable material. These were then sewn into quilt squares and placed into a specially made, sealed photo stand. They were then filmed decomposing on the very soil from which they sprang. The individual quilt square videos were each put on a loop of decomposition and recomposition,
moving back and forth between vibrant colors of flowers and plants to clouds of white and taupe mold. All of the filmed quilt squares were then compiled together into a patchwork collage video. The combination of quilt squares, decomposing at different rates gives the impression that the quilt almost breathes as a result of them returning to the earth.

Those ancestors that were part of the westward expansion of the United States were always on the move, nonetheless, there is still a record within those lands of my past. My father’s family history has been well documented over many generations. I am grateful for the legacy that they have passed onto me, but that is not the whole story of where I come from. Much of mother’s family history has been a mystery. The stories are not well preserved and there are many gaps in the information. Although I have been told many stories of my heritage on my father’s side, the ancestors on my mother’s side have impacted who I am through their choices as well. I will never know all the influences for good or bad that my ancestors have done, but I am a product of their lives. I have been shaped by all of them, even if I am unaware of them.

In acknowledging my ancestor’s role in the history of the land, it is important to recognize that I am not proposing a definitive history of any place or person. Woven within the land are many histories, and it is important to recognize the validity of each of these. My family history contains both elements of great heroism and faith, and terrible tragedy and offenses that have affected not only myself, but the communities that they have lived in. Their impact has left lasting traces in the landscape that I must sift through to understand. But this is also a symptom and characteristic of the whole human race.

Nature/Gather

The materials for my art are by and large gathered from nature. This gathering starts in the spring, when the plants begin to emerge from the ground. The golden blooms of forsythia flowers and gold blankets of dandelions on dry western lawns become the first signs of spring.
The poet, Robert Frost said of spring:

Nature’s first green is gold.
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s flower.
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.\textsuperscript{16}

Cycles are everywhere in nature, one continuous round of growth, death, and regrowth. Every step is needed to participate to make the cycle continue. You cannot have a spring without a winter. Nature follows strict laws that are not governed by people or politics, but by heaven.

I enjoy the annual cycles of growth and death in nature and am inspired by these processes. Natural materials disintegrate, lose color, and mold over time. The practice of my artwork and the process of decay are intertwined aspects of my creative journey. Over time, the flowers in all of my works will start to disintegrate, a reminder that this was just a season, that life would continue after each cycle. These materials return to the ground and nurture a new environment.

Gathering materials that have grown from the earth and harvesting them in their natural state creates a special connection to the material and place. Rather than buying materials in a package from the store, I am able to find a deeper understanding of the material itself. Anni Albers said:

Our materials come to us already ground and chipped and crushed and powdered and mixed and sliced, so that only the finale in the long sequence of operations from matter to product is left to us: we merely toast bread. No need to get our hands into the dough. No need—alas, also little chance—to handle materials, to test their consistency, their density,

their lightness, their smoothness. . . Modern industry saves us endless labor and drudgery: but, Janus-faced, it also bars us from taking part in the forming of material and leaves idle our sense of touch and with it those formative faculties that are stimulated by it.17

The artist Wolfgang Laib connects threads of nature and domestic activity, as he collects pollen from plants to make his art. His philosophy is: “The pollen is the beginning of the life of plants. . . and not less. I felt this is the essence of life and this is something which holds the world together.”18 Of beauty Laib said:

I am not afraid of beauty, unlike most artists today. The pollen, the milk, the beeswax, they have a beauty that is incredible, that is beyond the imagination, something which you cannot believe is a reality—and it is the most real. I could not make it myself; I could not create it myself, but I can participate in it. Trying to create it yourself is only a tragedy, participating in it is a big chance.19

I see beauty in the materials and capacities that I have collected. This beauty may be in the symbolic nature of soil and flowers or in the sacrificing gestures of a homemaker. I see connections to our role in a bigger plan, beyond what we see, and my role in the eternal nature of things. My role as a mother, as it connects to my ancestors and children, is a constant influence on my work. The beauty in my work is a byproduct—aren’t things in nature that way? I become a maker in the middle of the process, a collaborator with nature.


Seasons/ Methodologies

Spring/Gather

I started to keep a record of the plants that I collected to make my art. This was mainly so that I could remember the feelings that I had, the places from which the collections came and the seasons to expect their future harvest. They became field notes to me. Field notes are a “record of observations and activities that you encounter or participate in during fieldwork.”20 Good field notes will offer descriptions, interpretations and reflections of the experience. I wanted to share these journal entries and offer them up as my field notes, to allow a view of the experiences I gained as I collected my harvest.

April 29, 2021

It’s hard this time of year to have patience. I look around and see things starting to emerge from the soil, or signs of life on the trees. I know the season for collecting and preserving is at my doorstep. If I wait, I will have a plentiful harvest of tulips, hibiscus, pansies, and whatever the gardeners have in the works to pull up and replant new flowers. The gardeners are extremely generous and let me gather as quickly as I can.

The word quickly is difficult for me. So much patience for a small window. If I miss it, it’s gone. I noticed today that they pulled out a huge garden bed for some kind of renovation in front of the alumni center. I felt sick. I missed my chances. Got to keep an eye on the ground so that I can retrieve the spoils.

Right now, the things in abundance have been dandelions. I equipped my family with buckets and went to the church to gather the flowers. I had, on the previous day, gathered around

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my apartment with my youngest daughter, Caroline, a decent amount. I went back on Monday to gather as much as I could by myself. It was funny to see people walking purposefully on the other side of the street to avoid me. I considered what is a weirder job: staring at a computer crunching numbers all day or gathering unwanted plants and transforming them into something beautiful?

This last week, I took all the dandelions that I had dried and separated the flowers from the little green part at the end. I didn’t realize that the yellow flowers would try their darndest to seed before dying. They had started their transition. Only a few flowers made it to seed, but most just ferociously changed to half puff and half fluff. It’s like I preserved the transition. Not quite a flower, not quite a seed either. These flowers must be programmed to reproduce no matter the circumstance. In fact, when I cleared a whole section of yellow flowers, twenty minutes later, it had already bloomed a new batch. Gathering my materials takes an incredible amount of time. William Richard Lethaby said, ‘The best way to think of labor is as art. . . By welcoming it, and thinking of it as art, the slavery of labor may be turned to joy.’21 Collecting materials has created an intimate relationship between me and the earth. I anticipate the life that springs from the ground, excited to collect the fallen flowers that would be working their way back into the soil. Excited for the possibilities of transformation, creation, and the natural properties of decay to take place. I can hold these materials and create something for just a moment. I am enchanted by the plant cycle, wanting to insert myself into the picture. Nervous that I might miss the season.

April 29, 2021

At BYU, there are at least four magnolia trees by my studio. They turn brown in the dehydrator. It's a shame. They are like thin banana peels, go figure. A few weeks ago, the wind blew so hard that it knocked full blossoms out of the trees. Those ones dry purple. The young tender petals will preserve and should be the only ones that I collect, but I can’t ignore the older ones on the ground. They let go of the tree when it was the right condition for them. They are so plentiful around the tree. I couldn’t help but gather them too. Today, I gathered the last of the Magnolia flowers. There are no more blooms. I am discouraged that I might miss the garden clean up when I am in New York in two weeks.

Still looking at the ground. Piles of green flowers? Pollen things on the ground? I consider gathering them. Walked pass, then went back. I pulled my mini broom out of my backpack and swept up the earth. I brought these lime green things back to my studio and separated the unwanted debris. It wasn’t tortuous like the dandelions are.

I rode back home on my bike, staring at the ground. Recognizing all that I missed on my path, realizing it will be gone tomorrow.

Summer/ Harvest

My ancestors settled the Western United States. They were rolling like tumbleweeds across the landscape, always driven to a new settlement. Wanting to understand where I came from, I devised a trip to travel across the United States in the summer of 2021. It is during the summer when flowers are in bloom. I traveled with my family from the San Francisco Bay area, my birthplace, to the Midwest. The goal was to collect materials, soil and plants, from the places where my ancestors either were born or died. I wanted to interact with the places they came from, gather and touch the land that they worked.
I wanted this trip to stimulate my senses, to handle the ground, collect foliage, and breathe the air from the places my ancestors did the same. Summer is at the peak of the season, when most things are in bloom.

The materials I collected from these trips were individual in nature, holding a record of place for me. Becoming a history of my ancestor’s relationship to the earth, the ground that I came from. The trip gave me a chance to handle and experience the materials that my life line had experienced, bringing me closer to them.

June 8, 2021

Yesterday was the start of our big trip. We are in Medford. Right now, we are listening to Everclear: I will buy you a new life, way up in the west hills, I will buy you a garden where your flowers can grow. Kind of a fun new meaning.

Today we are on a Matthew Guinn Clemens and Martha Ann Mullins hunt. They were both born in Miami, Missouri and were married on the trail when they came out west. We found a pioneer cemetery by the LDS temple in Medford. What a blessing. Lots of flowers in bloom—so many colors. Golden poppies, and purple sweet peas were taking over the grounds.

Where we are camping is close to the place my ancestors first arrived, Slate Creek. There is no town in Oregon by that name, but a creek by that name runs off the Rogue River where we are camping.

June 9, 2021

In Grants Pass, at a park, I collected rose petals. A woman came up to me. She was with her grandchild who was picking up bark and sticking them into his mouth. I commented on how when we get older, we don’t do that anymore. She said it was healthy for us and gives us a stronger immune system. I suggested that if we went back to that, perhaps we would all be a bit healthier. She told me that many people do what she calls a forest wash. You go to the forest for
an earth cleanse. You remove your shoes, walk barefoot, breathe the air and allow the forest to cleanse you. A return to the earth.

When I was gathering the rose petals, a woman came to me and admired my work. I told her that I wasn’t the gardener. I was a gleaner gathering the things that the plant was shedding. I told her of my trek. She said when her mother died, she was in Ireland. She decided to gather the soil from the yard that her mother played in, by the tree by the swing. This was brought to the United States and was the first soil placed on her coffin.

**June 12, 2021**

We did not find soil that I was satisfied with in Medford, Ashland, Grants Pass or the Slate River. Most of the soil in these towns looked manipulated to create well-manicured gardens. Soilless on our way to California, David pulled off an exit so that I could grab a bit of earth. I found some rather sandy soil. I was hoping for soil with a little more spunk. We continued on this backroad to return to the freeway. David pulled the car over, grabbed the shovel and a bag and ran up a hill that had the brightest, reddest soil as possible. It was so sweet. We continued on our trek; this time completely satisfied.

We crossed the Oregon/California border later than we had hoped for. There was rain in the forecast, so we decided to spend just the day in Dorris and then drive in the night to Corning.

In Dorris we went straight to the cemetery. We were able to find Robert Samuel Reed, Mary H (Hinman) Reed, Joseph Matthews, Ada Day Reed and William Thomas Clemens. We also saw 5 eagles.

We later stopped at Matthews Road where Ada and Joe had a ranch. It was at this ranch, years ago, where my grandmother was beaten by her stepfather Joe. He was trying to rape her, and she fought him off. Her cousin noticed that she wasn’t at school and found her, left for dead
in the barn by Joe. Her cousin saved her life. I collected soil from there, then went on to the
town.

There is a massive drought in California. There isn’t much growth. We found the big
barn where my grandparents first met. My grandma, Iola Clemens, was a whopping 4’ 10” and
my grandpa, Stanley Russ, was 6’ 5”. Her friend said she would give a nickel to the first person
that he asked to dance. My grandma said she never flirted so much in her life that night. She
came home a nickel richer. She grew up in the house across the street from the barn. The house
was gone. It had probably been torn down years ago. But, in the yard, there was rubber
rabbitbrush and elm seeds. I was able to scoop up both from the dry earth. June 12, 2021

We went to my Aunt Mae and Uncle Pete’s house for a Russ family reunion in Corning,
California. On their land they had two olive groves. I gathered the black dried olives from the
ground, and soil. The soil was the driest and poorest soil that I had ever seen. It has put a new
light on the parable of the olive tree. My grandparents, both with backgrounds of abuse, were
trying to raise a family. They reaped the harvest of ten children from that land. We went to the
house where my mom grew up. My cousin Russ owns the home. I collected pomegranate petals
and hibiscus flowers. The lavender from the hibiscus reminds me of my grandma Russ.

June 13, 2021

We went to church today. Someone said that faith was like a mustard seed. I began to
ponder on how seeds are the end product of a plant's life cycle. They don’t just appear from
nowhere, they come from a fully mature tree, with the same potential. A seed will grow into the
likeness of its parent plant, if nurtured and cultivated. Also, when I gather seeds, I know that the
parent is close by.
**June 14, 2021**

We went to San Francisco and saw my dad’s house on Larkin Street. Dad’s bedroom was on the top floor and had a clear view of Alcatraz. We gathered soil and loose flower petals from a park on the corner of Lombard and Larkin streets, a park that my parents had deemed not safe to go to. While getting out of our car a man came up to us to warn us of riffraff who made frequent rounds in the neighborhood, justifying my parents' claims. Here I was able to gather brilliant pinks and purples from petals lying on the ground of a park not safe for casual enjoyment.

**June 15, 2021**

We went to the East Bay today. We found my father’s parent’s grave in El Cerritos, California. We collected tiny daisies from the grave. Nana was the most flamboyant and colorful person. She would be very displeased with me for gathering the most common flower (a weed) to represent her. She loved color and loved to have clashing colors. I’ll have to be very thoughtful with what I collect for her.

**June 16, 2021**

It was in Santa Cruz where my great Grandmother, Ada Day Reed, was born. We played at the beach and collected sand and sea weed there. We went up to the mountains to take some mountain earth home with us too. My great-great grandparents left Santa Cruz when the population reached 17 families. It was too crowded for them, so they moved north to Dorris, California. This week, some fires have started in that area. The roads are closed. I am grateful that we were there last week. I remember how dry it was.

**June 29, 2021**

We are in Nauvoo. We drove through the night to get to our destination, set up camp and played. It rained so hard. Luckily our tent kept us mostly dry. I didn’t experience any wet soil in the west, it was so dry there, so I was a little nervous about bringing home mud. I prayed for a
moment of sunshine, so I could collect. It wasn’t until the last day that we had a full day of no rain (well almost). We went to Edward Hunter’s home. He had these beautiful bright blue flowers that were showering the earth with petals. I almost cried when I saw them. All of my children were whispering to me ‘mom, look’. They were as excited as me. I was given permission to gather the petals while David gathered some soil for me. In the soil, there were bits of brick.

**June 30, 2021**

The next day we drove to Peoria. We didn’t know where to go. I decided to go and find the oldest standing house in town. It was the home to the daughters of the American revolution. As we drove up the driveway to the house, a man was stationed at the end, as if to greet us. He kindly told us that the museum was closed, and that he was the gardener. I was thrilled, he was the very person I wanted to see. I spoke with the gardener, John, a retired math professor, and told him of our trek. He had just finished pruning the garden but invited me to gather anything that he missed on the ground for me to glean. John led me to the back where we were able to see a glorious view of the river. He was happy to let me collect. When I was finished, he gave me a handful of buckeyes that he kept in a mason jar. When I asked if I could take some of the soil, he led me to his neighbor’s yard and commented on how they wouldn’t mind, because they were not tending their yard like they ought to be. What were the chances that this man would be right where we drove up to? I know it was a miracle to have this encounter with the gardener.

**July 1, 2021**

Today we started our trek going to the Rosehill Cemetery in Chicago. This is where Chester, my grandpa’s brother and my great grandma Marie are buried. She has an unmarked grave. I didn’t collect any flowers there but paid my respects.
I collected flowers at Lake Michigan, where my Grandpa Stanley Russ was a lifeguard. I found morning glories and common yarrows. Both were very common as well as weeds. I thought about how both managed to grow in a sandy soil under extreme windy conditions. I also gathered flowers from Millennial Park. They are very delicate; I wonder if they will survive. I was surprised with the color pallet that I gathered from Chicago—sage, white and a touch of lavender. Chicago holds the weight of a family tragedy. It is never spoken of in my family’s past as a thriving ground for our growth.

**July 14, 2021**

We went to Looking Glass township where Sarah Pea Rich was born. It’s just corn fields after cornfields. There were no flowers anywhere. I was in a pickle. I make it a point to only collect the things that I can glean, petals or flowers fallen to the ground, but I have no reservations about pulling and collecting weeds. I gathered as much clover, creeping yellowcress and straw colored flatsedge as I possibly could. They were all so non-fantastic, pedestrian. Sarah was such an amazing woman. I laughed when the kids pointed out in her journal, she would chide people for being frivolous. There was nothing frivolous about these flowers. As a woman who was extremely resourceful, maybe this collection was appropriate.

Looking Glass Township is just outside of St. Louis. On the campus of Washington University, they had beautiful red mallows just dropping to the ground. I gathered them. Sorry Sarah, I just might add something a little frivolous to your collection.

**July 16, 2021**

We went to Miami, Missouri where sixteen of my ancestors either were born there or came to die, but not both. It was a stopping ground before they all headed out west. David said that he had never seen a town in the advanced stages of death before. It was like a ghost town
except that there were still people and bugs inhabiting the space. I collected Queen Anne’s lace, black-eyed susans, barley, red rose petals, and a variety of unidentified flowers. The cemetery was larger than the town and the only spot that felt bright and cheery.

Frustrated that I needed earth and foliage for Robert Samuel’s birth state, I gathered ashes from the campground. It is unclear where he came from.

Fall/Preserving

The fall is a time of harvest. The foliage offers her last fruits before they go dormant during the winter months. Animals start gathering food in anticipation for this. I make sure in the fall that I too have stored enough supplies, in my case, art supplies for winter. Most of the foliage that I gathered from my trip was dried on the dashboard of our car, a convenient dehydrator. In the fall, the spoils from my trip were arranged in neat jars, labeled by material and place and lined in my studio. I had seaweed from the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, weeds of all sorts, flower petals ranging from reds to purples and soil, sand and rocks. Also in my collection were locally harvested foliage, from flowers to seeds, burnt ashes to leaves. All my materials would be used in my art to create hand-sewn items, quilts and dresses.

Sept 20, 2021

I woke up early to separate the whites from my cottonwood seeds from 5:45am–11.45am. It was nonstop. I have six more bags to go. I started picking more cotton, endlessly. Talk about the struggle. Wrestling with the artwork.

Sept 21, 2020

I have been working for nine hours straight today, trying to make this material do what I want it to do, then it all started to fall apart. I had to walk away. I am not sure if it is salvageable. I am so sad, but also hopeful.
I went on a walk this afternoon with my husband. He said that my work is odd. I make pedestrian household items out of natural materials that are expected to be temporary. They are given a lot of care but won’t last long.

I don’t know if I have ever considered my work as pedestrian before. I mean sure, I don’t think that there is anything too spectacular about any of them. They are pretty regular, but there is an obsessiveness about the thing. I don’t even know if the quilt will come together.

I think where I went wrong today was trying out different ways to lay the blanket. The more it was moved, the more it ripped. It was pretty terrible-falling apart in my hands. I didn’t cry. I think I should have. Instead, I walked away. I have spent so many hours with such an unruly thing.

**Sept 22, 2021**

The quilt worked! I came up to my studio at 6:30am to get a start on it. The quilt has rips. I didn’t intend on rips. I think they are honest. This uncontrollable thing. . . ugh.

David says that it's like a seed pod that is bursting open. It is certainly a squirmy blanket. Trying to position itself in a tidy manner becomes a wrestling match with the most delicate.

In my frustrations last night David said to me, “Of course it’s not going well. You are taking materials and using them in an unconventional way. What do you expect? No one does this.” I am out to torture myself.

I place the blanket on my chair, neatly folded, made from materials that weren’t meant to be contained. I see a mother with a child on her lap in place of the blanket and chair and start to cry.

*Winter/Decay*

Winter is a season of dormancy. During the winter months, I feel like I remain dormant in my studio, working away with the materials I have collected. Winter is also a season of death and decay. This decay is a healthy part of the environment. Decay nurtures the ground in
preparation for the next generations and season for growth. Decay naturally becomes a part of my work because of the materials that I am using. Sometimes I feel like I am trying to fight it, and other times, I feel like I have the opportunity to participate in it. I like both the struggle and surrendering that I find in decay.

January 14, 2022

It seems that I am constantly in a fight with nature and its secret weapon: decay. I sat today, for the fourth day in a row, drying this dress with a blow dryer, I already know who will win. Decay is always the winner. My goal today is to prolong its effects. I am always scared that the flower petals have started to mold from yesterday's work. I know that if mold doesn’t overtake it, time will. The colors will slowly fade, and the stains will turn brown. Right now, the colors are brilliant with a mix of tulips, hibiscus and pansies that I collected from the university’s gardens last spring.

I finished drying the dress today. I always hold my breath as I cut the dress from the mannequin. The dried flowers had embedded themselves onto the fabric, they also had taken a great hold onto the form. I had to use force to pry the dress from its mold. Pieces of once precious materials collected, now dropped freely to the ground. I took the shell off, hoping for something magnificent to emerge. On the inside of the dress, the flowers left their stains of deep purples, reds and lavenders. I am always enchanted by the stains. I have little control of what is happening on the inside of the dress and am always surprised what I had been secretly creating.

I honestly hated this dress from the beginning, it was made of the last of my scraps. I kept telling myself, the work isn’t done yet, there is still so much more process that it needs to go through. I am glad that I followed through. I can’t help but think that the object I am looking at
today will change over the months, the materials desperately wanting to break down and return to the earth.
Exhibition

My MFA exhibition, *Between the Garden and the Gardener*, took place on Brigham Young University’s campus in Gallery 303 of the Harris Fine Arts Center during the early spring of 2022. This gallery is a large room with white walls on all sides. I chose to center my works away from the walls and create my own installation. I made multiple eight-foot-tall walls to house the artwork in. These walls created interior and exterior spaces within the gallery. Three of these spaces had a quilt resting on a chair in the center of the space. One of the walls had a quilt housed within the wall with a projection of decaying quilt squares on it. The walls were finished with drywall and painted white on one side and left with wood exposed and painted green on the other. The walls that I made were placed in the room in the same pattern as the decaying quilt squares in the projection.
Conclusion

April 11, 2022

It’s the beginning of a new season. I noticed the forsythia was starting to bloom two weeks ago. Today, I saw three different varieties of tulips, plum and pear blossoms as well as maple pollen that was still attached to the trees. Only the blossoms have started to make their way back to the ground. The season for collecting is at my doorstep.
Images

Figure 1 – Taming the Unruly

2021, dandelions, cottonwood seeds, pectin, thread, chair, 30 × 12 × 14 in.
Figure 2 – Pietà

2020, flowers, pectin, walnut husks, cotton, chair, 38 × 24 × 18 in.
Figure 3 – Pressed

2021, English daisies, satin, gelatin, thread, glass, wood, 39 × 42 in.

Figure 4 – Pressed
Figure 5 – Pressed Daisies,

2021, pansies, hibiscus, dress, gelatin, glass, wood, 38 × 24 in.

Figure 6 – Pressed Daisies
Figure 7 – Materials for Decomposing Quilt
Figure 8 – Decomposing Quilt, video still
Figure 10 – Exhibition View
Figure 11 – Exhibition View
Figure 12 – Exhibition View
Figure 13 – Exhibition View
Bibliography


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