

THESIS

FROM SACRIFICIAL LANDS TO RECIPROCITY: ART AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Submitted by

Janine Thornton

Department of Art and Art History

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2020

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Thomas Lundberg

Kevin Kissell

Emily Moore

Johnny Plastini

Copyright by Janine Thornton 2020

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### FROM SACRIFICIAL LANDS TO RECIPROCITY: ART AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Oh I would touch with this love each wounded place  
- Anita Barrows, "Psalm"

My thesis artworks focus on interconnection and on the Western cultural perception of a separation between humans and nature. This perception developed during the nineteenth-century Westward Expansion, which viewed nature as a source of resources to be utilized and tamed. Within this separation is an assumed hierarchy in which nature is viewed as lesser or expendable when compared to humans. Land continues to be sacrificed for human wants with no regard for the impacts that this land use has on nature and humans, or on our delicate ties of interconnection. The word interconnection is very broad with many meanings and interpretations. In this work, interconnection refers to relationships, especially from an environmental perspective, in which individual behaviors affect other life forms and natural systems. This interconnection is a web of cause and effect, in which actions of individuals have impacts that ripple out into the world. It is often difficult to understand the effects that individual actions have on others, as it requires a heightened awareness of our world and its issues – awareness that can be challenging to achieve. I believe more discussion and action are needed to help expand awareness and sensitivity towards environmental threats. The questions guiding my research ask, a) how I visually represent the concept of human/nature interconnection, b) how I express the environmental necessity of relationship and reciprocity in our actions, and c) how social

engagement can help to expand awareness and discussion. I included social engagement in my thesis because I believe a greater depth of understanding can be encouraged through collaborative works with artists and other disciplines.

I explored ideas of human/nature interconnection and relationship through studies of materials, place and the environment. Materials such as fibers, cement and plastic connote relationship, culture, consumption and waste. Fibers are reminders of everyday consumer items such as clothing and housewares, which also can provide a sense of status through the brands selected. Plastics link to consumer product consumption, and to trends, which lead to waste when the item is no longer of value. Plastic is another manufactured material used for packaging and consumer product integrity. My use of plastic ties back to product consumption and waste, as most plastics become landfill. Cement is a manufactured material most frequently seen in construction projects, which aligns with urban development and shifting relationships with nature.

Following my work with materials, I looked to my relationship with place, focusing on where I live. This included developing a better understanding of how I relate to the land and wildlife around me, and impacts I make by living there. By making the subject matter of my work more personal, I am better able to see my particular relationship with nature and the impacts of decisions I make.

Next, I expanded my personal perspective from my locale to a larger view of the rural environment through the collaborative development of the *Sacrificial Lands* exhibit, which includes my artwork along with work of other artists, poets, and scientists. The *Sacrificial Lands* project showcases individual perspectives, creativity, and research

from a variety of fields. The objectives are to encourage expanded discussion of environmental topics and to promote collaborative endeavors that seek greater environmental awareness and restoration.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee for their insight and guidance as I progressed through the program. I have grown so much in my art practice. Thank you to Jim Dormer for all the critiques, conversation and encouragement that helped me better understand lines and composition. I want to thank Erika Osborne whose class profoundly changed my art focus. I finally have the vocabulary for what I was trying to say. Thank you to Kristen Bukowski for all her feedback on my thesis. Thank you to Anita Barrows for permission to use her beautiful poem, "Psalm." I also want to thank Jacque and her horses, Otis and Ronnie, for the wonderful horse hair gifts. A very special thank you to my husband and family for all their love and support. I could never have done this without them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Relationship with Materials .....	4
Relationship with Place .....	9
Relationship with World .....	13
Conclusion .....	22
Figures .....	26
Bibliography .....	38

## INTRODUCTION

And I would travel with you to the places of our shame. The hills stripped of trees, the marsh grasses oil-slicked, steeped in sewage. The blackened shoreline, the chemical-poisoned water.

- Anita Barrows, "Psalm"

Nature is often viewed as protected spaces of aesthetic beauty that inspire a feeling of awe or the sublime. These are spaces that people visit but do not occupy, such as parks and recreational areas. By protecting some places and not others, aesthetically beautiful areas are seen as having value by providing locations for relaxation and outdoor enjoyment. As a result, unprotected land is viewed through a contrasting lens, in which the land is valued for what it can provide. Environmentalists have used the term "sacrificial" for land that is identified as having little or no aesthetic value but, in turn, is valued for its potential to be modified or transformed towards a culturally determined relevance. The value of the land becomes defined for its "usefulness." Transforming the land to "useful" purposes gives priority to grazing, farming, fracking, and urbanization, all driven by anthropocentric needs, with little or no consideration for establishing relationship with the land. An anthropocentric perspective focuses on benefits to humans, while ignoring or minimizing the impacts to the land and its biodiversity. If there is no consideration of a relationship with the land, the land becomes damaged and depleted through our exploitation. As a result, these spaces face challenges to plant and animal biodiversity through loss or change of habitat, environmental degradation through contamination resulting from extraction processes or pesticides, and water shortages due to diversion or increased demand. Environmental historian and professor, William Cronon states:

Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home. Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about using nature as about not using it.<sup>1</sup>

I believe the challenge for each of us is not so much a question of using the land, but of how the land and its use are understood. Understanding our relationships and interconnection with the land must be a key consideration in land use. Edward Said, leader in the academic field of postcolonial studies, introduced the concept of “the Other,” which is something or someone unfamiliar and apart from one’s culture.<sup>2</sup> Viewing nature through the perspective of the Other promotes separation and purpose, rather than relationship and reciprocity. However, in light of the environmental challenges we currently face, relationship and reciprocity are key. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes about the necessity of re-establishing our relationships with the land:

Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is the relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land. Therefore, reconnecting people and the landscape is as essential as reestablishing proper hydrology or cleaning up contaminants.<sup>3</sup>

This idea of restoring relationship resonated with me. In turn, I began to question how my art can communicate a call for environmental awareness and express our oneness with nature, in contrast to current cultural constructs that frame a duality of humans and nature. This duality causes nature to be viewed as separate and not subject to the same accommodations afforded to people. By viewing nature in this manner, the exchanges of cause and effect are not fully addressed. To depict oneness, I began to explore ways

to express this duality, so that oneness could be experienced by visually connecting contrasting aspects of materials into a unified object.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH MATERIALS

I would put my hand there with yours, I would take your hand, I would walk with you  
through carefully planted fields, rows of leafy vegetables drifting with radioactive dust;  
through the dark of uranium mines hidden in sacred gold-red mountains  
- Anita Barrows, "Psalm"

Coming from a background in mechanical engineering, I have worked to understand materials and their capabilities — the starting points for my thesis efforts. Research into Eva Hesse's work identified an approach that guided my interest in establishing a visual representation of duality. Hesse explored various combinations of materials to create a sense of duality through visual contrasts such as hard and soft or order and chaos. My efforts have been influenced by works such as Hesse's *Accession II* (1969), in which she combines a rigid, metallic box structural form with soft, flexible rubber tubing (Figure 1). This attention to dualism guided my material investigations. I was searching for materials to visually represent the perceived human/nature duality, which I now saw could be accomplished effectively with contrasting materials. My approach for this investigation was through the combination of rigid structural materials with soft, pliable fibers. By depicting duality through contrasting materials, I would then attach these separate forms into an assemblage to denote a sense of separateness (visible as individuals such as plants or people) and oneness (as a combined singular structure representative of community or world).

My preliminary investigations explored various structural materials to contrast with organic fiber forms. Material choices are significant to me as metaphorical representations of key ideas that I am trying to express. Structural materials, such as wood and cement, invoked abstract concepts such as culture and nature. In the work

*Connections* (2018), laminated wood blocks were machined and stained with fiber-reactive dyes (Figure 2). Yarns and threads, dyed with rust or fiber-reactive dyes, create the complexity of the interconnections between the block forms. In subsequent works, *Interior/Exterior* (2018) and *Release* (2018), I explored various fabrication techniques to develop cement forms (Figures 3 and 4). The cement structure for *Interior/Exterior* was formed over an expanded metal mesh. To support a spherical shape for *Release*, cement was hand-packed over a pieced-and-stitched aluminum-screen structure. The aluminum screen allowed for a more thin and lightweight form, while maintaining strength during handling. This was significant for allowing me to use cement in more complex configurations.

I decided to focus on cement as the primary structural material for my thesis work. Cement offers a rigid opposition to yarn or fabric. This opposition enhances both materials in the work, emphasizing their differences. Cement is also a manufactured material that has significant environmental impacts during processing and transportation. While I continued to use this material for my thesis, I am already reviewing other environmentally friendly options for future work. Using cement contributes to discussions on urban development as it is used as a building material, is one of the first materials seen at a construction site, and can symbolize land lost to housing developments. From a purely artistic perspective, cement is a very adaptable material for sculptural forms, as it can be readily molded and cures at room temperature. The most significant challenge was the weight of cement. This led me to utilize options such as aluminum screen to reduce weight while maintaining the structural integrity of larger forms.

I also evaluated methods for making modular cement forms to allow flexible reassembly and reconfiguration of cement structures in various installations. An example of this is *Where We Live* (2018), which was formed by pouring cement into two separate molds created with insulation foam (Figure 5). Insulation foam was cut and assembled to become the shape (Figure 6). A metal rod was cast into the lower form to allow the separate pieces to be set together or taken apart for reconfiguring later. Each of these three early cement works was combined with bleach-discharged or rust-dyed fibers, using the fibers to connote movement and connection. Following these initial efforts, I focused on cement as the method to best signify the human constructions and urban expansion I wanted to represent.

Cement is a common construction material. However, by utilizing it in my artwork, this commonplace material transforms from an object to what Bill Brown refers to as a *thing*. Bill Brown writes in *Thing Theory* that “we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things.”<sup>4</sup> Cement as an object discloses aspects of our society that are readily ignored in common, everyday items. Objects become things when our relationship with them is disrupted. This disruption, in turn, increases our awareness of the object. By utilizing cement for art forms, I can disrupt our conditioned relationship with the construction material and shift awareness to it as a thing.

Cement forms became the static aspect of my artwork. Fiber became the dynamic aspect, setting up a visual duality within the works. I completed a series of studies that incorporated various forms of fiber to heighten a sense of movement and fragility, and to offset the heavy, static presence of cement. My focus was on threads,

yarns, and ropes, using them as visual metaphors to define lines of movement. Threads are able to create linear movement as well as the complexity of entangled natural forms such as plant roots and rhizomes. Combining threads with cement forms provides the opportunity to establish visual relationships of the static and dynamic, and human-made and natural materials. I investigated the interactions of threads and yarns as individual entities in several pieces, such as *Beginnings* (2018), which was created with individual yarns colored through rust dyeing, paint and ink (Figure 7).

*Beginnings* was influenced by Rothko's later abstract paintings, in which he combined color and simplified visual forms to impart spiritual and emotional content (Figure 8). His goal was to engage the viewer in a transcendental experience. Many of Rothko's works have a strong vertical format, which adds to the sense of transcendence. In *The Power of Center*, Rudolf Arnheim says "the vertical dimension serves as the preeminent domain for visual contemplation, whereas the horizontal is the realm of activity."<sup>5</sup> In my work, *Beginnings*, I explored Rothko's style of simplified color shapes and strong vertical presence, as a method of imparting a meditative quality and sense of spiritual to my work.

While developing the significance of spiritual transcendence in my practice and forms, I also wanted to investigate methods to express spiritual aspects of the physical world around me. In focusing on interconnection and oneness, I can also include my spiritual relationship with the world through my art. The idea of depicting the spiritual in the physical world led to a shift to create work that included a relationship with place; in particular, where I live in Colorado. However, two key ideas are carried from these initial explorations into my thesis body of work. The first idea is the representation and

inclusion of duality within my work to emphasize separation and opposition. The second is a belief that vertical formats can bring a sense of the human presence as well as a spiritual presence into the work.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH PLACE

I would listen with you in drafty hospital corridors as the miner cried out in the first language of pain; as he cried out the forgotten syllables of his childhood.

- Anita Barrows, "Psalm"

While my initial explorations addressed materials, this focus was limited and did not fully address the sense of relationship and interconnection I was trying to portray. This led to a shift to examine my relationship with place, in particular, where I live in eastern Colorado. In *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard states:

No matter how far culture will go to destroy its connections to nature, humankind and all of our technology, good and bad, are inextricable parts of Nature – the original determinant, the mother and matrix of everything, that all-pervasive structure that lies beneath scenery, landscape, place, and human history.<sup>6</sup>

My town is in a predominantly rural area southeast of Denver. Where I live allows me to interact with various aspects of nature on a daily basis. In the last few years, I have also seen considerable urban expansion in the surrounding areas; these have shifted the landscape and the pace of living. A previously slower and more contemplative rural lifestyle is now faster paced and more hectic. Wildlife are fewer and open land is reduced dramatically. These changes will continue in the area and, as a result, relationships of residents with the land are shifting towards less connection with nature. All of these changes have had a profound impact on me and motivated this examination of my relationship with place and how to depict it through my art.

Research into Ann Hamilton's work and process led me to address ways to depict my engagement with my locale and my concerns about the loss of rural land and

habitat. To begin her research, Hamilton starts by interacting with the site, walking through it and the surrounding area. Joan Simon writes that:

Ann Hamilton's installations might be described ... as 'site-generated,' engaging as they do the formal and structural particularities of a place to make its presence palpable, compounded by a kind of site-reading that for Hamilton begins intuitively and is developed through her library research.<sup>7</sup>

By interacting with a place, Hamilton develops an intuitive sense of it, which she then translates into an installation through materials that evoke her feelings about the area. She created *Habitus* (2016) for The Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) in Philadelphia as she developed an understanding of the building's history and its surrounding neighborhood (Figure 9). Materials become metaphors for her impressions of the locale. She repeats meaningful components within her installations to strengthen the imagery and connection.

Through my research of Hamilton's work, two key strategies emerged as useful in my own practice. The first is "walking a space," to develop an intuitive sense of how the location affects me. The second method is the translation of my impressions of place into materials. Joan Simon expands on Hamilton's process by saying:

In a reciprocal process attending the many ways a site 'speaks' to the artist and the many ways she might 'speak back,' Hamilton's work might further be recognized as 'site-responsive,' quite specifically in her words, as "an act of attention."<sup>8</sup>

These acts of attention develop as a result of the relationships Hamilton establishes with particular sites. This sense of relationship and the translation of relationship into material selections influenced my work at this time. My first work depicting a relationship with place was *Fading Landscapes* (2019), cyanotype prints on silk organza (Figure 10).

The images are based on four photographs of open ranchlands that I took along the eastern Colorado plains. Many ranches in the area are being sold and replaced with housing developments, changing the land and the local relationships with place. In my work, images are repeated three times, gradually fading and losing details, influenced by the ways these open spaces disappear. The cyanotypes are printed onto silk organza, softening the imagery and suggesting qualities of distance and memory.

For *Rural/Urban* (2019), I sorted through census data for rural and urban populations in Colorado from 1900 to 2010, to look at how these populations have shifted and to ask what those shifts mean to residents (Figure 11). Bare cement rods represent the relative urban populations and are combined with wooden dowels covered with yarn and local prairie grasses, which signify the comparative rural populations for specific years. Urban population has grown substantially during this time period, impacting wildlife habitat, biodiversity and water resources. With population growth expanding, limited water resources in Colorado become a significant concern. My work *Our Water* (2019) includes natural water filtration materials and questions our assumptions about drinking-water purity (Figure 12). Developing awareness of these assumptions is important to understand what is happening around us. In *Coming Back to Life*, Joanna Macy says that her “aim has been to unblock the feedback loops, so people can trust their own experience and speak the truth of what they see and feel and know is happening to their world.”<sup>9</sup> I see art as an opportunity to engage viewers with environmental issues and to allow them to develop their own understanding of what is happening in the world.

In addition to addressing rural areas around Colorado, I also wanted to focus directly on my relationship with where I live and how that relationship affects my own nature and life experience. Where I live grounds me from it I derive a sense of place as well as an awareness of the interconnectedness of the world. Surrounded by ponderosa pines, my property is also home to many birds, deer, fox, and other life. The pines provide shelter, shade, and food for many. In *Entangled* (2019), I aimed to express my connections with society and where I live (Figure 13). My T-shirt, embedded with cement, addresses my relationship to society through the material selections. While I am part of society, I am also connected to the land where I live, symbolized through the tangled bundles of yarn and pine needles. Items I purchase and their environmental influences on where I live seem to be separate but are actually interrelated through the impacts of manufacturing and transportation. My work *Landscapes* (2019) continues the idea of land and connection through small blocks of molded cement that include local dirt and pine needles (Figure 14). Surfaces of the molded cement blocks were shaped by small clay pieces placed within the molds before pouring. Bleach-discharged yarns cut across the cement, connecting across the implied landscapes.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH WORLD

I would be with you when the radio announced the dreaded news, I would sit with you in the chill drizzle, as the heavy trucks carried before us the heavy cargo of death.

- Anita Barrows, "Psalm"

The final stage of this research expands the concept of interconnection and reciprocity to interactions in the world. Reciprocity in interactions becomes an exchange in which consideration is given to all parties affected by the interactions. For these works, I turned to weaving as a process to create grids. Amy Goldin writes that a "grid is an isolated, specified, unlocalized field, as close as we can come to perceiving pure being, free from any added rationale or emotional activity."<sup>10</sup> The regularity of a grid provides a sense of visual order and objectivity. In a woven structure, there develops a sense of continuity and connection as yarns shift from being individual pieces to a single constructed form.

My first weaving used a black 3/2 perle cotton warp and weft materials of repurposed plastic. I chose discarded plastic as a way to better understand my relationship with plastic and its pervasiveness in my life. Joanna Macy discusses how "often our story is largely unconscious and unquestioned, and we assume it to be the only reality."<sup>11</sup> My relationship with plastic was automatic and largely unquestioned. I wove with strips cut from non-recyclable plastic that I collected from packaging and bags during one summer. My objective was to see the amount of plastic that would go to landfill if I had not included it in my weaving. I added to the weaving with materials that became available each day. Weaving itself became a meditative process through which I developed a better understanding of the impacts of my purchasing decisions.

The weaving process gave me an opportunity to see the plastic as a thing, where the weaving heightened my awareness to the material. With new attention to my own plastic waste stream, I changed behaviors to reduce plastic in my life.

In her essay, “Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket,” Robin Wall Kimmerer states:

I can muster no reflective moment for plastic. It is so far removed from the natural world. I wonder if that’s a place where the disconnection began, the loss of respect, when we could no longer easily see the life within the object.<sup>12</sup>

The amount of plastic waste I generated in three months increased my awareness of the magnitude of landfill plastic being accumulated. The impact of plastic is environmentally harmful, but as I wove I also realized that this material can make us feel safe and secure. Food is protected with plastic packaging. Online purchases arrive clean and dry with plastic. Printed messaging on the plastic can be friendly, engaging, and neighborly. I realized that plastic was a pervasive everyday material that I did not even see. By focusing on it as I wove, my perception of the accumulated material changed and increased my awareness of plastic. Shifts in awareness are key to increasing environmental consciousness. T. J. Demos says, “whatever we do, we cannot sit back passively and witness our own destruction as a source of either visual pleasure or neutral observation.”<sup>13</sup> Increasing awareness by shifting materials, such as plastic, into what Bill Brown refers to as “things,” shifts our understanding away from neutral observation to active interaction with the material. By actively interacting with plastic, I learned how my actions compounded the environmental problem and found ways to reduce my plastic waste.

The resulting work, *Skin* (2019), became a forty-foot weaving (Figure 15). After the weaving was completed, I knotted individual horse hairs over the surface. For me, horse hair is symbolic of strength and life-force. Horse hair also connects to the ranching in my rural locale. Most horse hair used in my work comes from a local rancher who saves hair brushed from her horses. Using the hair is another reference to interconnection through friendship, relationships with animals, and relationship to place. By combining horse hair with the weaving, I endeavored to enliven the plastic strips, causing a shift from pieces of a common material to an energized weaving that encourages engagement through its size and surface variation, and also contemplation of the role of plastic in our lives. Cement cylinders support the weaving across the distance spanned by the sculpture. The cement ties back to my early work with materials, signifying manufacturing and development. Cylindrical forms relate to wheels, movement and transportation, but also to culverts or pipes for water and waste passage. Each cylinder is filled with unwoven plastic pieces, with references to the plastic of packaging and life choices. The piece confronts viewers with the overwhelming nature of plastic and implies how our choices can affect the environment. Joanna Macy speaks to this when she says that “our experience of pain for the world springs from our connectivity with all beings, from which also arise our powers to act on their behalf.”<sup>14</sup> Our power and strength to confront environmental issues and work to enable change come from addressing this pain and still deciding to continue working towards change. The pain shifts to become a conscious decision for action. As Robin Wall Kimmerer states, “transformation is not accomplished by tentative wading at the edge.”<sup>15</sup> Transformation occurs through action.

Poet, artist and activist Cecilia Vicuña develops fiber installations utilizing ancient *quipu* forms to encourage community activism and social engagement with both the artist and locale. By interacting during the installation process, individuals come together for a common purpose and expand both their understanding of the issues and their relationships with others (Figure 16). To Vicuña, “an object is not an object. It is the witness to a relationship. Seeing and naming the beauty of the exchange creates the space for it to unfold. Weaving is awareness of the exchange.”<sup>16</sup> Through this shared experience a greater awareness of the participants’ interconnection within the world develops. Quipu are Andean knotted cords that were used for communicating stories or documenting exchanges of goods. Vicuña discusses how “they created the quipu (knot), a poem in space, a tactile, spatial metaphor for the union and interdependence of all.”<sup>17</sup> Creating these community “objects” develops relationships among individuals, a greater understanding of community interconnectedness and appreciation of how community interconnectedness can expand into world interconnectedness. My decision to include a community environmental exhibit as part of my thesis was influenced by Vicuña’s goal to engage the community to bring together diverse people towards a common goal.

I developed the exhibition *Sacrificial Lands* to address the call to environmental action and the desire to express my interconnection with the world that emerged in my thesis work. A list of the participants is included in the Appendix. The exhibition is an opportunity to extend my studio practice into curatorial engagement. Curatorial engagement is significant to me as an opportunity to bring different viewpoints together to help audiences better understand the complexity of environmental issues. *Sacrificial Lands* is a collaborative exhibit that will be on display from December 9 through 12,

2020 at the Carnegie Center for the Creative Arts, Fort Collins, Colorado. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway expresses that “none of the parties in crisis can call on Providence, History, Science, Progress, or any other god trick outside the common fray to resolve the troubles. A common livable world must be composed, bit by bit, or not at all.”<sup>18</sup> Each person has a responsibility to help bring about changes needed to support the environment. Watching urban expansion encroach into our rural community helped me to define the exhibition scope of Southwestern grasslands, our relationships with these lands, and the life inhabiting them. The title, *Sacrificial Lands*, addresses the perspective of land as the Other – land that is separate from people and regarded as a resource to be utilized, rather than as an entity that fundamentally impacts our lives with such gifts as water quality and biodiversity. By understanding our togetherness and mutual influence, we can begin to understand our relationships and move towards reciprocity and respect in our exchanges with the environment.

The exhibition engages a variety of perspectives on rural lands through contributions from visual artists, scientists and poets. These visual works include paintings, prints and sculptural forms. Poetry brings the emotional voices of lives closely connected with these spaces. Scientific data and analysis in the exhibition address where we are and how things are changing. Each point of view helps to expand our conversations of relationships and interdependence with the land around us. The exhibition closes with a poetry reading to encourage more social engagement and further expand the conversations. In her essay, “The Sacred and the Superfund,” Robin Wall Kimmerer states that “action on behalf of life transforms. Because the relationship

between self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us.”<sup>19</sup>

Parallel with the development of *Sacrificial Lands*, I wanted to also return to creating contemplative forms like *Beginnings*. This aligns with my final phase of thesis work, forms focused on our relationships with the world, in which I examine our physical and spiritual connections. David Morgan writes that “the spiritual in art is not a formal feature embedded in the surface of the image, but something that happens between the work and the viewer, or better, the worlds in which the viewer exists.”<sup>20</sup> The spiritual in art becomes an experience between the viewer and the art object. My final set of thesis works expands on the combination of weaving and horse hair, combined with a vertical format influenced by Rothko’s work. The first piece, *Exchange* (2020), is a narrow weaving, 1 ½ inches wide by 96 inches long, made of 10/2 natural linen with strands of horse hair handstitched onto the weaving (Figure 17). The horse hair travels across the weaving in separate paths. Each bundle is its own entity and appears to travel independently until it reaches the edges of the weaving where it engages with the wall. The hair activates the wall in a way that extends the weaving onto the wall’s surface. Weaving and wall become one surface. As they transition to the wall, the hairs become entangled and what appears to be separate bundles on the weaving is actually one entangled bundle. These chaotic entangled elements are similar to rhizomes. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari present the concept of the rhizome as one assemblage of interconnected separate entities. They state that “a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.”<sup>21</sup> Each

individual is a separate entity, but interconnected into the assemblage of our world through actions, relationships, and life circumstances.

The second work, *Umbilical* (2020), focuses on energetic aspects of these interconnections through undulating horse hair bundles attached to a central cord, reminiscent of energy movement along a spinal column (Figure 18). The weaving is 2 inches wide by 90 inches long and consists of a rust-dyed 10/2 half-bleached linen yarn warp with an alternating ¼” diameter cotton rope and 10/2 linen weft. By alternating the rope and linen in the weft, I created constricted areas in the weaving that give a sense of vertebrae. For the central cord, I wrapped a fiber-reactive-dyed cotton rope with black plastic electrical tape. The central cord is part of the spinal form but continues along the wall to the ground, signifying the connection to Earth. Horse-hair bundles vary in size along the central cord as packets of energy flowing along the cord. *Umbilical* becomes a representation of energetic exchange through the connection with the Earth. This piece was inspired by a quote from Stephanie Kaza, which says “a person can have both the experiences of “Twoness” – communing with a specific and separate other – and the experience of “Oneness” – touching the unified field of energetic flux out of which all forms arise.”<sup>22</sup>

*Grasses* (2020), the third piece, returns to cyanotype printing processes and memories of nature and place through imagery of local grasses printed onto 10/2 half-bleached linen weavings (Figure 19). The prints are painted with rust and embroidered with rust-dyed thread. Indigo-dyed linen yarns connect the two cyanotype prints, creating a single entity from separate weavings. Horse hair is stitched into these linen yarns, signifying the roots of the plants. Grasses appear to be separate plants but are

entangled in the ground through roots within the Earth. We appear to be separate forms but are also entangled through the Earth, our rooting source. My most recent work, *Cathedrals* (2020), combines cement, deconstructed screen-printed cotton fabric and horse hair on 10/2 half-bleached linen weavings (Figure 20). The deconstructed screen-printed fabric is machine-stitched onto the weavings. I used the screen-printed fabric to vary the texture of the artwork and also to explore using my weavings as fabric to be combined with other material. This was also an opportunity to combine the weaving with the cement directly as opposed to separate cement and woven forms. The cement, as urban expansion, is encroaching on the small natural spaces represented by the screen-printed fabric. Horse hairs imply the connections with nature that are broken and ignored. After completing these pieces, I saw the local color areas as reminiscent of stained-glass windows in stone cathedrals. To me, the idea of cathedrals connects to the sacredness of the Earth and the importance of understanding and respecting our relationship.

In viewing my thesis art as a body of work, I was also able to see the evolution of particular trends. Using multiples, such as horse-hair bundles, and the elongated vertical weaving format expresses accumulation, but also implies a timeline. Time is also present as a duality when comparing the hyper-consumer, modern plastic in *Skin* with the slowed perception of ancient time from the rust-dyeing in *Umbilical*. There is also a suggestion of architecture through the cement fabric, cast forms, and grid-like structures of the weavings. To me, this brings a sense of the human-made and our impacts in the world, and connects back to my past experience as an engineer creating constructed forms. Cement also seems to imply feelings of separation and isolation

through its simplified forms and cold, rigid surfaces. Incorporating horse hair contrasts with the cement and activates the weavings as well as the surrounding walls and space. By expanding out from the work to include the wall, the horse hair is no longer contained within the work but extends the idea of interconnection beyond the art and into the world.

## CONCLUSION

I would stand next to you in the forest's final hour, in the wind of helicopter blades, police sirens shrieking, the delicate tremor of light between leaves for the last time.

- Anita Barrows, "Psalm"

The focus of my thesis work has been on the interconnectedness and oneness of humans and nature, and on methods to effectively express these abstract ideas in a visual manner. My thesis work addresses these ideas through three focus areas: materials, locale, and world. Early works explored my relationship with materials, providing me with processes to depict our perceived separation of nature and humans through contrasting materials such as fibers and cement. I established visual oppositions in a manner influenced by Eva Hesse, which created a sense of duality that was offset by the unity of the art work. These efforts were then followed by work that addresses my relationship with place, focusing on materials related to where I live, such as pine needles and soil, and on the rural landscape around me. Examining my relationships with components of place within my area gave me greater insight into how my actions influence what happens around me.

Exploring where I live brought me to the Colorado grasslands and our perspectives of the value of these places. This developed into the *Sacrificial Lands* exhibit, a method of exploring our relationships with these places and how these relationships affect the environment. Stephanie Kaza writes that we "have to go right toward the suffering in order to feel compassion awaken."<sup>23</sup> It is through acknowledging our interdependence and seeing the impact of our actions that we are able to move toward the suffering and the resultant compassion for the world. Through compassion,

we can move towards a greater awareness of our relationships and begin to look at opportunities for reciprocity. Each individual has the chance to help bring about changes in awareness and levels of environmental activism.

My final thesis works further expand the idea of interconnection by examining how I see myself in the world. Michael P. Nelson writes that “to recognize oneself as part of the world, created by and creative of a rich and beautiful network of lives, is part of what it means to be fully human.”<sup>24</sup> I express a contemplative presence in my weavings through an extended vertical format, creating a line between above and the ground below. To me, horse hair depicts life force or energy and creates a sense of movement and energetic exchange throughout the weavings. Giving form to these energetic exchanges reminds me of our humanity and the responsibilities we all share.

## ENDNOTES

1. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton & Co, 1996), 85.
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Ltd., 1978), 9.
3. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "The Sacred and the Superfund," in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 338.
4. Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 4.
5. Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 37.
6. Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997), 11.
7. Joan Simon, "Bodies of Work, Matters of Time," in *Ann Hamilton* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2002), 14.
8. Simon, "Bodies of Work," 14.
9. Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014), xxv.
10. Amy Goldin, "Patterns, Grids and Painting," *Artforum* 14, no. 1 (September 1975).
11. Macy and Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, 5.
12. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 155.
13. T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 81.
14. Macy and Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, 66.
15. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "A Mother's Work," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 89.
16. Cecilia Vicuña, "QUIPUing from Santiago, Chile to Sydney, Australia," in *Cultural Threads: Transnational Textiles Today*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 49.
17. Vicuña, "QUIPUing," 45.
18. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 40.
19. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "The Sacred and the Superfund," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 340.
20. David Morgan, "Secret Wisdom and Self-Effacement: The Spiritual in Art in the Modern Age," in *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, ed. Richard Francis (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 40.
21. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.
22. Stephanie Kaza, *Green Buddhism* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2019), 4.

23. Kaza, *Green Buddhism*, 47.

24. Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson, *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2010), 166.

## FIGURES



Figure 1. Eva Hesse, *Accession II*, 1969, galvanized steel, vinyl, 30  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 30  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 30  $\frac{3}{4}$ ", Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI. (Source: <https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/accession-ii-47951>)



Figure 2. *Connections*, cotton yarn, laminated wood, acid dye, rust dye, 96" x 24" x 3" (maximum block size), 2018.



Figure 3. *Interior/Exterior*, cement, metal mesh, discharged black cotton yarn, rust, 40" x 6" diameter, 2018.



Figure 4. *Release*, cement, aluminum screen, cotton rope, rust, 20" diameter, 2018.



Figure 5. *Where We Live*, molded cement, wire, cotton thread, rust dye, 63" x 10" x 8", 2018.

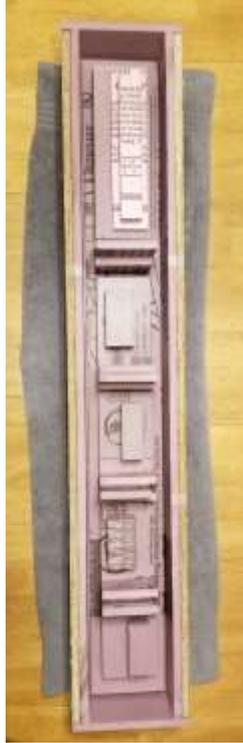


Figure 6. Pink foam insulation mold for *Where We Live*, 2018.



Figure 7. *Beginnings*, cotton yarn, wood, rust dye, ink, paint, 72" x 24" x 6", 2018.



Figure 8. Mark Rothko, *No. 61*, 1953, oil on canvas, 115 ¼" x 92" x 1 ¾", Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA. (Source: <https://www.moca.org/collection/work/no-61-rust-and-blue-brown-blue-brown-on-blue>)



Figure 9. Ann Hamilton, *habitus*, 2016, Installation, Fabric Workshop and Museum / Municipal Pier 9, Philadelphia, PA. (Source: <https://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/habitus.html>)

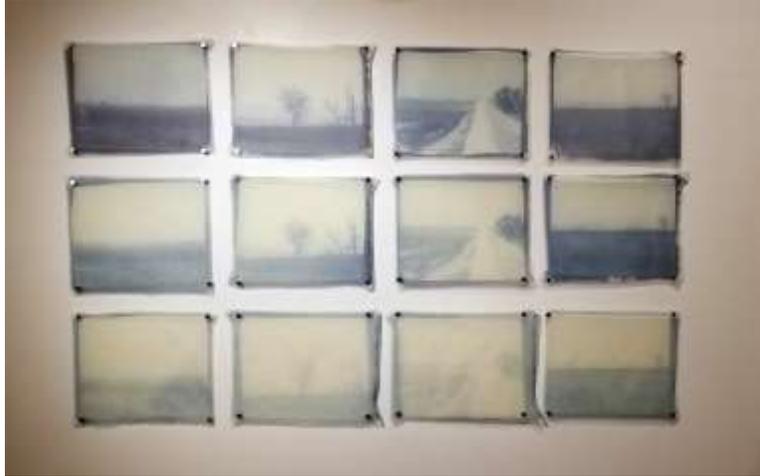


Figure 10. *Fading Landscapes*, silk organza, cyanotypes, 30" x 36", 2019.



Figure 11. *Rural/Urban*, cement, yarn, dried plants, wire, 36" x 132" x 1", 2019.



Figure 12. *Our Water*, copper pipe, wood, glass, filtration materials, 96" x 20" diameter, 2019.



Figure 13. *Entangled*, cotton T-shirt, cement, cotton yarn, pine needles, 72" x 24", 2019.



Figure 14. *Landscapes*, molded cement, discharged cotton yarn, dirt, pine needles, 12" x 36" x 4", 2019.



Figure 15. *Skin*, repurposed plastic, cotton yarn, horse hair, cement, 480" x 8" (weaving), 2019.



Figure 16. Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu Womb (The Story of the Red Thread, Athens)*, 2017, dyed wool installation, EMST—National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece. (Source: <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13557/cecilia-vicuna>)

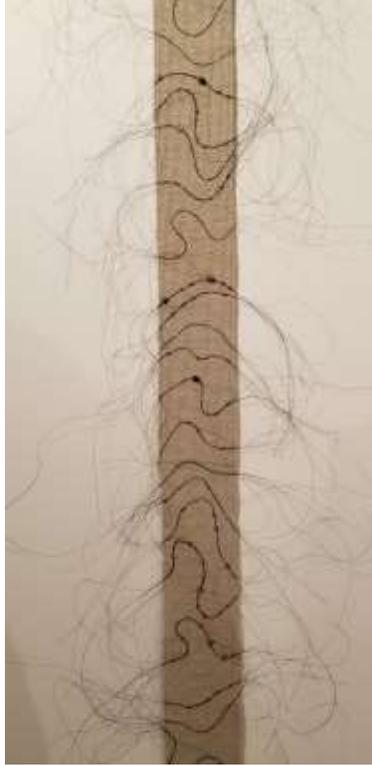


Figure 17. *Exchange*, linen yarn, horse hair, wool yarn, cotton yarn, wire, 96" x 1 ½", 2020.



Figure 18. *Umbilical*, linen yarn, horse hair, rust dye, paint, cotton rope, 90" x 2", 2020.



Figure 19. *Grasses*, linen yarn, cyanotype photographs, indigo, horse hair, wire, 23  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 2  $\frac{5}{16}$ ", 2020.



Figure 20. *Cathedrals*, linen yarn, cement, acid dye, horse hair, wire, 2  $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 23", 2020.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnheim, Rudolf. *The Power of the Center*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Barrows, Anita. "Psalm." In *We are the Hunger*, 66 – 67. American Fork: Aldrich Press, 2017.
- Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 1 - 22.
- Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 69 – 90. New York: Norton & Co, 1996.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Demos, T. J. *Against the Anthropocene*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017.
- Goldin, Amy. "Patterns, Grids and Painting." *Artforum* 14, no. 1 (September 1975).
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Kaza, Stephanie. *Green Buddhism*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2019.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.
- Lippard, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press, 1997.
- Macy, Joanna and Molly Brown. *Coming Back to Life*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014.
- Moore, Kathleen Dean and Michael P. Nelson. *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2010.
- Morgan, David. "Secret Wisdom and Self-Effacement: The Spiritual in Art in the Modern Age." In *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, edited by Richard Francis, 34 – 47. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1978.

Simon, Joan. "Bodies of Work, Matters of Time." In *Ann Hamilton*, 10 – 21. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2002.

Vicuña, Cecilia. "QUIPUing from Santiago, Chile to Sydney, Australia." In *Cultural Threads: Transnational Textiles Today*, edited by Jessica Hemmings, 45 – 49. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

## APPENDIX

List of *Sacrificial Lands* participants:

Jennifer Barfield

Autumn Bernhardt

Matthew Cooperman

Dixie Crowe

Mark Dineen

Maria E. Fernandez-Gimenez

Jacob Job

Aby Kaupang

Norm Keally

Rowan Lyford

Alick McCallum

Johnny Plastini

Eleanor Sabin

Terri Schulz

Melinda Smith

Janine Thornton

Robin Walter

Zane White

Kate Wilkins