



**JOYFUL MAKING IN PERILOUS TIMES**

by

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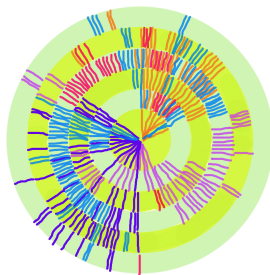
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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“Meanwhile, all the kids in Silicon Valley have no screens and are learning to crochet.”

— *overheard parent at an East Vancouver elementary school  
PAC meeting, on how to manage kids’ preoccupation with digital devices*

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## Abstract

What may seem like a fuzzy retreat from devastating personal, local, and global realities is in fact a tactile, humane action to seek alternatives. This thesis explores object-making in a world of hazardous objects and conditions, intertwining the gathering of found materials, rote-making and community engagement.

The supporting document is presented as a matrix extending across five case studies of projects over the course of one calendar year. It is set in a journalistic format to engage a wide range of readers. Each project picks up threads of ideas and weaves them through information sources from both inside and outside the privileged space of the art institution, in loosely-woven support of a complicating cultural practice.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	2
List of Figures	4
Acknowledgements	5
Preface	6
Position	9
Method/methodology	10
Case study: Scaffolds	14
Case study: Resurge	18
Case study: Space Craft	22
Case study: Foundlings	26
Case study: Hearth	29
Reflection	36
Works cited	39
Works consulted	42

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## List of Figures

Fig. 1: <i>Scaffolds</i> , 2019.....	17
Fig. 2: <i>Resurge</i> , 2019.....	21
Fig. 3: <i>Space Craft</i> , 2019.....	25
Fig. 4: <i>Foundlings</i> , 2019.....	28
Fig. 5: <i>Hearth</i> , 2020.....	35

“Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last,  
and it always tells the truth.”

— Margaret Atwood, Der blinde Mörder

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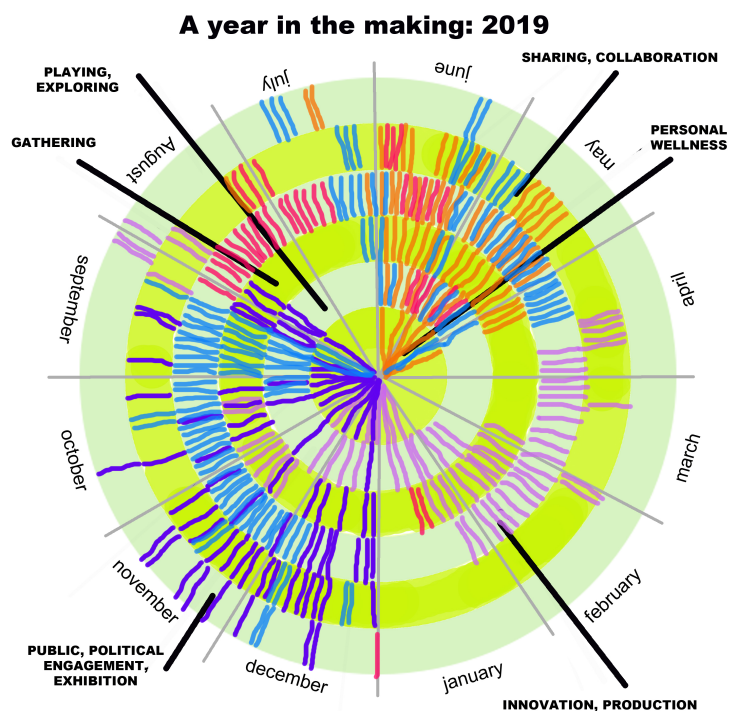
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To Trish Kelly, thesis supervisor and recently-appointed Vice-president Academic and Provost,  
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To Bob Krieger, whose legacy of editorial cartoons illustrates the value of  
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and

To all the aunties who took a moment to share through hand-making.



## Preface

This graphic is a colour-coded summary of five material explorations interwoven with elements of time, motivation and activity over the course of one calendar year. Each colour is separated out at the heading of each of these five case studies to visually capture the scope of the work.

The calendar year is pictured as a circle, with the longest days arching above like the sun's trajectory, and the shortest at the cold, dark bottom: the inward months of retreating from the noise and demands of the high-consumer holidays and regrouping, one stitch at a time. Thin threads of ideas unfurl into bigger projects in brighter days, back out in the world.

There is no hierarchy here in the colour-coded tracking of a year's work, no distinction between the value of exploring the tactile world with children and academic research, or between producing objects for purchase or exhibit and knitting up community, creating to quell anxiety and to add voice to the growing public dis-ease and dissent.<sup>1</sup> All these various engagements with found material and simple domestic-craft methods interlock, strengthening my commitment to a low-waste, process-led way of working, independently and collaboratively.

### **ENTANGLEMENTS: SOME QUESTIONS**

My ever-expanding process of material exploration resists easy categorization. “Critical making” or “maktivism” grapples with “the mediated and direct experiences of interacting with the material world” (Ratto and Boler, 2014) that speaks to socio-political engagement.

However, this focus eclipses the other, multiple layers of meaning in the concept-centred objects themselves. In search for a more inclusive “flexible matrix” (Bryan-Wilson, 2017) I connect closer with the notion of the “super-object” offered by Louise Mazanti (2011). The super-object is a positioning of the object both within art discourse — in conversation with craft, painting and sculpture, installation and performance — but also with the everyday, as an artifact of labour, of collaboration with others, and of memory of other makers.

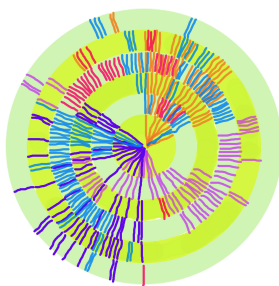
This framework that encompasses the multiple possible meanings of the object of my material exploration releases me from the need to engage in specific art genres and any remaining boundaries among sculpture or painting or craft or installation. It allows me to weave in domestic craft traditions, conceptual craft and the feminist art movement of the 1960s and '70s through various materials and method, modes of display and communities of collaborators, toward the larger project of creating meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of this writing, U.S. President Donald Trump has been impeached, RCMP have been arresting protestors of a gas pipeline through unceded Indigenous territory on this west coast, and the world's human population is cowering from a coronavirus pandemic.

The super-object, then, can be seen as an “independent lens” (2011) for assessing work through a vantage point that embraces conceptual hand-crafted objects and critical making with all its complexities reflective of our highly complex, conflicted culture. This thesis, then, is a joyful resistance “to definition, positioning and classification” (2011), beginning with the self within a personal practice and engaging with others who may or may not self-identify as artists or craftivists. In this effort to create space and time to reflect and to connect I have two main questions:

- How can material explorations contribute to the shared desires of personal wellness, social connection and political engagement?
- How can I embed into my crafted objects multiple levels of meanings and a grounding in both the privileged art context and the everyday, real world?



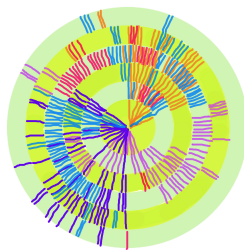

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## Position

My family history is one of privilege that also includes the trauma of mental illness, addiction, poverty, homelessness and childhood sexual abuse but none of it as a result of systemic, racist subjugation. My ancestors had the freedom of mobility and opportunity to settle here, uninvited, in the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the xʷməθkwəʼəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. I acknowledge this in the faith that the national project of reconciliation can be tackled one personal gesture at a time. Mine include sharing common methods and space of handmaking, weaving together threads of personal connection across our conflicted pasts.



*Sisters Not Lions, 2018, by Carlyn Yandle. Embroidery and paint on linen, 10" diameter. First known as "Ch'ich'iyúy Elxwíkn" (Twin Sisters). Read [more](#) on this traditional story and on learning Indigenous history through modern artwork.*



“One minute you're waiting for the sky to fall,  
the next you're dazzled by the beauty of it all.”

— from *“Lovers in a Dangerous Time”*  
music and lyrics by Bruce Cockburn, 1984

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## Method/methodology

### A PROCESS-DRIVEN PRACTICE

Making is tangled up in my DNA, passed down through my father (painter/sculptor) and mother (fibre-arts hobbyist), and incubated in a DIY<sup>2</sup> 1960s/'70s counter-culture ethos. Creating ‘something out of nothing’ is a driving force in my practice that extends back to early scrap-quilting, invigorated by the long legacy of material explorations of fibre-based artists like Sheila Hicks and Ann Hamilton. It continues as a low-waste approach to making that feels urgent in the face of the social and environmental horrors of advanced capitalism. I carve out time and space to make/do outside the dominant economic system of over-production/consumption in an increasingly distractive culture. By doing so I am taking matters — and matter — into my own hands in “rejection of the idea that you overcome problems by paying someone else to provide a solution” (Gauntlett, 2011). ‘Do-it-yourself’ is an ethos of taking personal responsibility and direct action to engineer methods and solutions, individually and with others’ knowledge of making. It is an uncomfortable intertwining of idealism and fatalism, a belief in the possibility of effecting change and the inevitability of global capitalism’s environmental and social destruction.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Do It Yourself,’ a craft vernacular that connects to the growing subcultures of Preppers and Survivalists with whom I feel increasingly aligned, to my dismay.

Working with my hands is a coping mechanism, a practical skill, a meditation, an endurance, a form of self-expression, a way to socialize and engage with the world, and a knowledge generator. Every skill I absorbed from an early age (papier-maché, collage, embroidery, calligraphy, macramé, painting, quilting, knitting, crochet, woodworking, metal fabrication, mold-making, etc.), every material (paper, wool, thread, jute, textile, paint, wood, clay, tin, fibreglass, plastic, etc.) deepens my fluency in my own methodology within an enduring language that carries human culture. It begins with one knot, one stitched block, one needleworked row. It builds up over time, transforming the discards into imposing, labour-intensive objects with roots in domestic labour, decoration and utility and which aspire to transcend their subjugated history.<sup>3</sup> This action that starts from the body as a reflex, an urge, may gather others through the sharing of this vernacular of common materials and methods. It is, in contemporary philosopher Rosi Braidotti's terms, indicative of a distinctly feminist political action that begins in our own "situated practices" (2014), our here-and-now circumstances that extend outwards, collecting up other voices as it expands into the public, political sphere.

The rhythmic, rote tasks at hand cross over media and methods, opening up space and time for thinking, turning threads of ideas into object-form, and exploring "new possibilities for significant engagement with our world" (Johnson, 2011). The work is shared, physically and locally through social engagement events, artist studio meet-ups and workshops for different communities of adults and children, but also digitally through an expanding virtual craft community beyond national borders. These various modes of creative exchange form practice-based research identified as "a/r/tography" (Irwin and Springgay, 2008) for its generative connections between art and education, as seen in my play-think-write-share cycle that leads to new ideas, projects and relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> This acknowledges the important work of the 1960s-'70s early feminist art movement that contested the systemic omission of female fibre artists in the privileged art space of the gallery and academia.

## GATHERING: MATERIAL AND PEOPLE

Collecting a wide range of ‘useless’ materials, ranging from plastic toy fragments to outmoded or worn-out garments to debris from sites of construction and destruction, is a form of community-building as those who contribute to a specific category of discards become invested in the outcome.<sup>4</sup> That collaborative component thickens as others are invited to participate in the physical making, as seen in *The Network* (2011-ongoing), an actual, tactile social network that has become increasingly complex with every public hands-on installation.<sup>5</sup>

The motivation for others to engage in the work may be to learn or share technique or it may be the interest in taking part in upcycling, hand-making or simply being in the space of other

makers. At the core of this methodology is the larger project of acknowledging and enhancing the shared desires of personal wellness, social connection, and public/political expression, whether in celebration or protest.



*The Network at the Vancouver Art Gallery for Family Fuse, 2015. Co-created with Debbie Westergaard-Tuepah. Photo: Carlyn Yandle*

<sup>4</sup> Past contributors include construction-industry day labourers, children (assisted by their parents and teachers), residents of a rural island community, friends and neighbours, city public-works employees and artists.

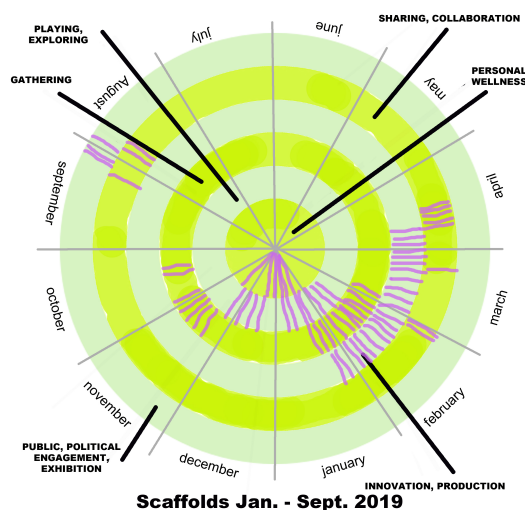
<sup>5</sup> Read more about the origins of this enduring collaborative artwork at <https://carlynyandle.weebly.com/blog/the-thing-is-bigger-than-our-original-idea>

## ROTE HAND-MAKING

Exploring the innate tendencies of material through various domestic-craft methods is key to discovering the innate behaviour of the material at hand. It is a process of physical logic, of 'if not this then that' trial and error and multiple iterations, working at a small scale and always with the large-scale possibilities in mind. Through this highly exploratory "methodology of material complicity" (Lange-Berndt, 2015) the materials at hand play the role of "willful actors and agents" (2015) in the choosing of a suitable low-tech, rote-making method. By playing with material I also play with the ideas emanating from the embedded history of the material such as a speculative housing market, climate change, fast fashion, or overproduction/consumption processes. Through these two notions of play, time and space opens up to allow for further expansion (2015), as I innovate, collaborate, research, and share newfound knowledge through images of early outcomes via social media.



At left: Details and screen shot of the Instagram view of No I Like Her She's 29, 2019, 14" diameter, by Carlyn Yandle, for the Tiny Pricks Project created by Victoria, B.C. artist Diana Weymar. The vast, growing number of donated embroideries featuring quotes by the current U.S. President Donald Trump is now an international touring exhibition.  
Photos: Carlyn Yandle



## Case study: *Scaffolds*

**Process:** Gathering, wiping, washing, drying, cutting, knotting, crocheting, binding, weaving<sup>6</sup>

*Scaffolds* (detail at right, and Fig. 1) is an imposing macramé tapestry knotted up in the luxury-housing boom in my immediate urban vicinity. Its frothy whiteness, on closer inspection, reveals hasty, provisional construction and environmentally-unfriendly materials.



The highly sculptural properties of Tyvek were explored over recent years first by cutting found remnants into strips, winding them into skeins and working them up into two giant crocheted doilies, following patterns from 1950s home-craft magazines. This weatherproof material was an attractive choice for installing the giant lace

<sup>6</sup> Companion column posted April 10, 2019 at <https://carlynyandle.weebly.com/blog/a-useless-thing-with-many-functions>

works in the public sphere to function as they do in domestic spaces: to protect surfaces and cover up unsightly elements with a whitewash of pleasing pattern.<sup>7</sup> *Scaffolds* is an extension of that cover-up scheme, the result of an elaborate, repetitive physical activity that helped quell anxieties about my own marginal housing situation and the relentless, shimmering investment edifices towering over my old port town.

*Scaffolds* is in dialogue with the monumental and laborious fibre sculptures, installations and tapestries of renowned American fibre artist Ann Hamilton, who famously agitates expectations of everyday textiles “by bringing them back into contact with raw materials and the sensate” (Owen 2011). The scale and concept of Hamilton’s heap of multi-hued denim, *Indigo Blue*, inspires through the juxtaposition of aesthetic beauty and the fraught plantation labour history of the American South. The work is also informed by the woven, knotted fields of Sheila Hicks,<sup>8</sup> who by weaving in everyday materials and objects has long challenged boundaries between fibre arts, painting and sculpture. My process-driven practice is propelled by Hicks’ prolific engagement with the material world, still producing in her mid-80s<sup>9</sup> imposing, fresh explorations in fibre.



Sheila Hicks, at her 2019 installation in Chile. Photo by Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio (Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

<sup>7</sup> More on the doily project posted Sept. 2013 at <https://carlynyandle.weebly.com/blog/discarded-dolies-demand-attention>

<sup>8</sup> Another student of Josef Albers (more on Albers in *Space Craft* case study)

<sup>9</sup> Including age is relevant here as it feels possible to have time to expand my full-time practice that began mid-life.

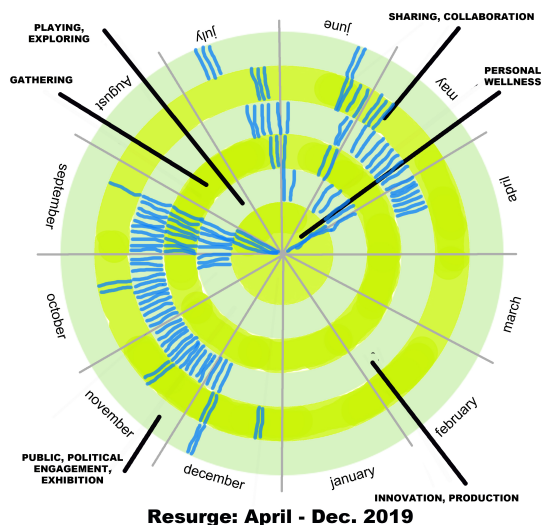
*Scaffolds* also plays in this space between materiality, history, abstraction and architecture, creating new spaces of inclusion (Adamson, 2019) through the gathering and exploration of culturally-rich discards from the urban landscape.

The initial gathering involved Latin-American immigrant labourers from some of the city's many residential-complex jobsites who delivered scrap items to the university campus on a regular basis for several weeks. The timing of the drop-offs and the selection of materials determined the scope, scale and resonance of the project. Over the course of three months the fibre artwork evolved through a collaboration between a single, repetitive macramé method and the inherent material properties of the detritus. This confidence that allows for the ability "to experiment without a plan and allow something unforeseen to emerge" (Jones, 2013) and relies on a fluency in various technical skills that extends back to an early age.

*Scaffolds* serves as artifact of the slow, intense labour involved on a grand scale that illustrates what political theorist Jane Bennett calls "the ability of things to make things happen, to produce effect" (Bryan-Wilson, 2017) and in this project, the effect was both personal and social. The rote activity required opened up time for solitude and space for thinking without distraction. The process of gathering was an opportunity to appreciate some of the realities of the personal costs and benefits of working in construction in Greater Vancouver's speculative-real estate economy, further strengthening this interweaving of tactile and political awareness. It is a piece designed both to entice as a decoration but discomfort that reading through the use of unusual, even hazardous, debris.



**Fig. 1:** Scaffolds, 2018. 80" x 80" x 8". Discarded Tyvek brand spun-polyester building wrap, PVC pipe, electrical conduits, rebar and other debris from large-scale, Vancouver-area residential and commercial construction sites. Photo: Nate Yandle



## Case study: *Resurge*

**Process:** Gathering, washing, drying, cutting, knotting, winding, hand-stitching, braiding<sup>10</sup>

*Resurge* (Fig. 2) is a twisting together of the soft hue and touch of used denim and complicity in an exploitive and toxic global-trade denim industry<sup>11</sup> to meet our insatiable individual desires for more.<sup>12</sup> Intertwining art and life, this object's origins is an apron/tool belt hybrid made out of necessity that launched a cottage industry of one-of-a-kind Work Wraps.<sup>13</sup> As the cloth was cut away from dozens of freely-available jeans, the byproduct — waistbands, labels and thick seams — pooled around my feet. A larger project began to emerge from this denim detritus to

<sup>10</sup> Companion column posted Dec. 6, 2019 at <https://carlynyandle.weebly.com/blog/tripping-on-this-troublesome-rug>

<sup>11</sup> See Pedro Mendes' documentary on CBC Radio's *Ideas*, September 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-jeans-became-one-of-the-most-polluting-garments-in-the-world-1.5280773>

<sup>12</sup> In her 2013 lecture, "Powers of the Hoard", Jane Bennett acknowledges the 'thing power' of capitalism that "was and remains a formidable desiring machine." (Video: <https://vimeo.com/29535247>)

<sup>13</sup> Retail site for this part-time cottage industry: <https://workwraps.weebly.com/about-work-wraps.html>

express ideas of piecework labour, globalized fast fashion and an ocean-going transport system that links far-off factories on this Pacific Rim. It began as a tight nucleus of force spilling out in all directions, following “the force and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being.” (Ingold, 2009). A loose macramé method was used to weave in the remnants of seams that inherently coiled and clustered while waistbands ran like rivulets through an expanding pool of netting, emerging as an oceanic topography.

Part meditation and part endurance test, this was a process of finding and dissolving pattern and horizons, of allowing the material to ebb and roil through simple, repetitive and laborious gestures. Feminist theorist Lucy Lippard relates these rote actions to “the ancient, sensually repetitive, Penelopean rhythms of seeding, hoeing, gathering, weaving, spinning as well as modern domestic routines” (1978) that connect the realms of the privileged space of art and the everyday. Working horizontally evokes domestic activities — ironing, cooking, wiping counters, vacuuming, washing floors — as well as the immediate vicinity of its making: the watery striations of ocean, island and sky. *Resurge* does not stand for the lingering hierarchy of vertical positioning, instead contesting the need to legitimize the work through the reliance of the “spatial shift from horizontal to vertical” that is then “institutionally framed and legitimized as art” (Bryan-Wilson, 2017).

This braiding together of contradictory positions evokes the works of the 1970s conceptual crafty movement, from the needlework wearable sculptures of videotape by then-Vancouver-based multi-disciplinary artist Evelyn Roth to Harmony Hammond’s<sup>14</sup> *Floorpieces*: circular braided-rug-like objects with painted surfaces made from fibre detritus from the garment factories near her New York studio. *Resurge* continues to break down remaining distinctions, hierarchies and binaries among sculpture, painting, women’s work and craft-based textile arts

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<sup>14</sup> The work of this feminist/queer-art force that dates back to the 1970s has been accredited with “bringing art down while also bringing textile craft up” (Bryan-Wilson, 2017).

(74), binding in current issues of gender politics and globalized factory labour and laying it at the feet of viewers. The large scale demands some precarious leaning in but that inability to fully capture the text in the textile labels aims to increase the sense of the magnitude of global production/consumption systems.

American artist Polly Apfelbaum continues to claim that contested ground of art, craft and the everyday with her “off the pedestal” *Fallen Paintings*, shifting the discourse horizontally by “valorizing the floor” and “reversing the cube view” so that the floor is the space for the art, and the wall is the everyday (lecture, 2017). She acknowledges that these works contain a “tough beauty” as a means to engage, as opposed to work that is “not something that people did not want to look at” (2017). This form of viewer-seduction into a deeper, conflicting reading is also used as a strategy by Anishinaabekwe multidisciplinary artist Rebecca Belmore, who grapples with “the beauty and the ugliness of how we are as human beings” (Belmore, 2018), evident as she arranges denim yardage into grey-blue currents and flows for an installation evoking a harsh history.<sup>15</sup>

The ability of material and method to evoke beauty and horror through its tactility and cultural underpinnings is a driving force behind *Resurge*. The particular method of making is designed to draw out the multiple, contradictory associations of these manufactured cast-offs: swirling, soft indigo blue hues; fast-fashion/over-consumption marketing; textural knotting and braiding; industrial toxic outflows; innovation in sculptural potential for denim; and extreme corporate profiteering on the backs of exploitative foreign labour practices. These embedded conflicting notions vibrate with a rich and toxic human culture, contributing to the “thing-power” of denim waste in its ability “to go from trash/inanimate/resting to treasure/animate/alert” (Bennett, 2004). The force of these ‘things’ in my hands connects with the many anonymous hands who

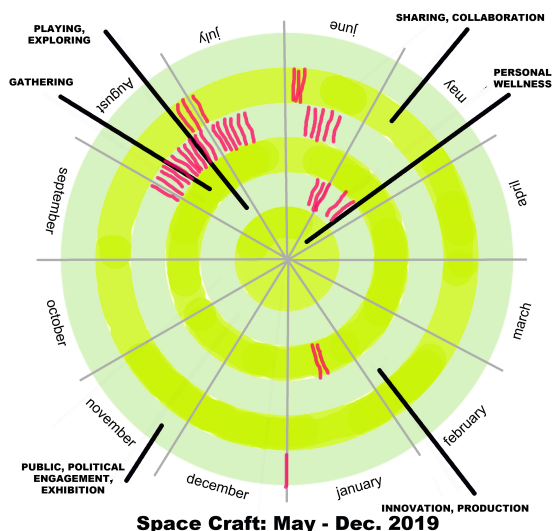
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<sup>15</sup> The installed denim material that comprises *At Pelican Falls* evokes residential school coveralls, seen worn by seven boys in a 1955 photo from a remote area connected to the artist. Read [more](#).

grow and make the cloth, who dye, distress, sew, package, display, wear, launder, fold and throw them away. Together and through the power of my own bodily material, the work aims to reverberate with “an internal resistance” to “the sheer volume of commodities and the hyper-consumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones” (2009). This transference of my own vibrations of resistance includes a resistance to the notion that matter doesn’t matter, and that change can be manifested through making.



**Fig. 2** Resurge, 2019. *Found denim jeans, thread. 12' diameter x 8"H.* Photo by Carlyn Yandle



## Case study: *Space Craft*

**Process:** Gathering, cutting, folding, hand-stitching<sup>16</sup>

*Space Craft* is an object of hybridized thinking between space, both in terms of physical area and the universe, and the multifunctional art of craft. Combining the slow-craft rote activity of traditional smocking with flashspun high-density polyethylene fibres is a tenuous, often frustrating venture. What feels like folly at first results in work beyond predictability or perfection and toward new forms and new ideas. The folds are all physics<sup>17</sup> and the stitching is a different kind of string theory.

The traditional craft of smocking transforms the rigid into elastic, the flat into the voluminous. In the making, space and voids open up as does time for the mind to wander from the macrocosm to the microcosm. Playing with materials becomes playing with ideas: black holes, space-time, the contracting universe, the infinite. Through trial and error and several iterations

<sup>16</sup> Companion column posted Sept. 22, 2019 at <https://carlynyandle.weebly.com/blog/finding-new-space-in-old-craft-of-smocking>

<sup>17</sup> The work references *Miura-ori*, a folding process created by Japanese astrophysicist Koryo Miura that has applications ranging from internal-medicine stents to outer-space satellites. Read more: <https://www.wired.com/story/the-atomic-theory-of-origami/>

540 square feet of area take shape with no beginning nor end. It is proposed as a conundrum: Is it math made into a model or a model looking for the math?

*Space Craft* was approached out of curiosity over the possible combination of the high-tech, industrial material of Tyvek through a slow-craft version of hand-smocking. The ancient craft of gathering cloth at geometrical points to create ease and stretch in garments was unexplored territory, having grown up in the plastic-elastic age. I experimented with flat sheets of scrap then scaled up as I was able to create more and different volumes. The laborious, rote activity of tying individual knots of thread opened up time to reflect on other possible applications such as collapsible shelters, and related methods like origami.

This material exploration could have been work produced at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, where a progressive but short-lived learning-through-making approach to liberal arts education was the crucible of American mid-century contemporary art (Adamson, 2007). This history is relevant here as it connects the importance of material exploration through simple materials and methods with the pursuit of knowledge. This is the driving force of *Space Craft*, an aesthetic object in



*American architect, educator, author, designer, inventor, and futurist Buckminster Fuller leads a class at Black Mountain College, date unknown. Photo: Creative Commons, CC PDM 1.0*

itself but also a mode for launching new ideas through simple hand-making skills not seen as “a discrete set of techniques, but as a way of being within society”<sup>18</sup> (Adamson, 2007). (Fig. 3)

<sup>18</sup> As envisioned by Josef Albers, the famously influential instructor at the college in the 1930s and '40s, formerly at The Bauhaus.

The legacy of Ruth Asawa, one of the more renowned graduates of Black Mountain College, is her learning-through-making voluminous wire sculptures, social-engagement projects, public artworks and art education opportunities for children. This holistic, “a/r/tographical” approach to learning and teaching through making (Springgay and Irwin, 2008) is seen in her art experiments that hung in her domestic spaces.<sup>19</sup> Her process can be seen as an activity counter to “modern, industrial capitalism” by resisting “the pernicious separation of art from life and daily experience”<sup>20</sup> (Grant, 2017).

Asawa’s objects may be fully appreciated for their multiple meanings — artifact of daily life, process, concept, political position, aesthetic object — when viewed through the lens of the super-object that accepts a dual positioning of the craft object in the privileged art context and the everyday (Mazanti, 2011). *Space Craft* can be seen as holding the same dual positioning, serving as a mode for exploration as well as a point of agitation against any lingering distinctions and hierarchies among sculpture, craft and fibre arts, and in dialogue with architecture, engineering and physics. It can serve as a record of the time spent in the labour of the piece and a reconsideration of the traditional skills of origami, smocking, and paper-folding. It can be read as artifact of performance that begins with the endurance-



Top: People look at Asawa’s sculpture at the De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, after her memorial. Photo: Steve Rhodes, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0; Above: Asawa’s 1986 origami-inspired Aurora fountain, San Francisco. Photo: Shawn Clover (Creative Commons CC BY-NC 2.0)

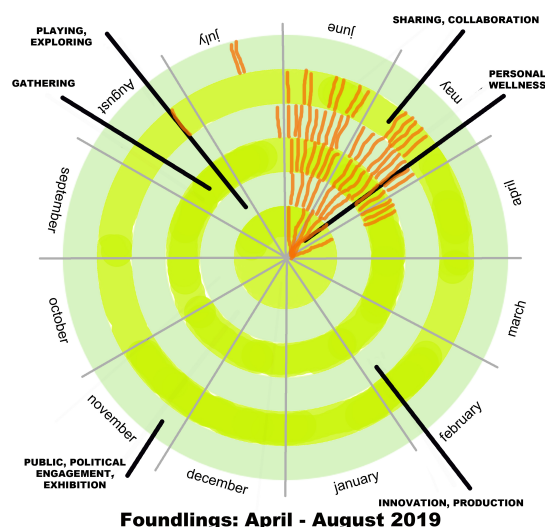
<sup>19</sup> In a life inseparable from art, Asawa necessarily created much of her work in the company of her own children; advocated for public arts education opportunities for children; and was the driving force behind the San Francisco School of the Arts. Watch Asawa in her own words in a [film](#) for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

<sup>20</sup> Quoting John Dewey, author of the 1934 seminal text, *Art as Experience*.

testing action of folding paper and knotting threads, and ends with its own ‘thing power’: “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 2004). That power is evident here in its own inclination to spiral tight in the centre and settle into its own gravity.



**Fig. 3** Space Craft, 2019: An exploration into unknown dimensions and notions of infinity through the material of 540 square feet of found construction building wrap, 64"OD x 36"H. Photos: Carlyn Yandle



## Case study: *Foundlings*

**Process:** Gathering, wiping, washing, cutting, binding, weaving<sup>21</sup>

A trip up to a remote Gulf Island<sup>22</sup> mountain of recycling-rejects sparked the *Foundlings* project that literally and figuratively grapples with the global problem of plastic. The idea for this collaborative work began on regular walks along the island foreshore. I compulsively<sup>23</sup> gathered up the relentless plastic shards of containers, fragments of rigid foam blocks and polystyrene packaging, binding up the bits for easy transport using found nylon rope and netting.

Over time the colourful clumps from each beach walk amassed, asserting themselves as something other than detritus, which led to research on binding in art and inevitably the works

<sup>21</sup> Companion column posted July 2, 2019 at <https://carlynyandle.weebly.com/blog/foundlings-kids-works-of-terrible-beauty-in-forest-display>

<sup>22</sup> Lasqueti Island: the only off-grid B.C. Gulf Island community (by choice) with regular public ferry service

<sup>23</sup> Making often starts with compulsion, a need to quell anxiety. In this case, it's the incessant debris on the undeveloped island foreshore, considered to be the remains of the Japan Tsunami of 2011.

of California sculptor Judith Scott (1943 - 2005). I could see that her prolific<sup>24</sup> practice of binding and weaving objects that agitate notions of sculpture and ability would be of interest to children.<sup>25</sup> Soon I was organizing a critical-making project with students from the island's one school, using a simple method of binding. The project held the opportunity of engaging children to physically wrestle with issues of consumption and environmental devastation<sup>26</sup> in their immediate surroundings by giving form to the invisible. The island community's waste manager offered up possible discarded petroleum-derived materials at the dump for consideration, and the school teacher allowed her class space for weekly making sessions. Through this organic, growing collaboration the material explorations evolved into *Foundlings* (Fig. 4), an open-ended, woodland exhibit of student work displayed on stump 'plinths' complete with titles in their own hand. The collection debuted at the island's annual arts festival in July 2019.

The actions of connecting with others through gathering, sharing knowledge of work of other artists, exploring the inherent qualities of discarded material, developing skills in the making and ultimately exhibiting the multi-layered objects together form a "living inquiry" that is "the ongoing living practices of being an artist, researcher and educator" (Springgay and Irwin, 2005). The art experience was beyond knowledge through "mere visual and textual representations" (2005) but an embodied process *with* the detritus and its inherent nature, working independently or collectively over weeks, not minutes, to open up time to consider and re-consider colour, form, techniques, and new modes of social interaction.

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<sup>24</sup> Scott's compulsion to entomb found objects in fibre resulted in a large volume of works in her short life as an artist that could fill large public galleries (and did).

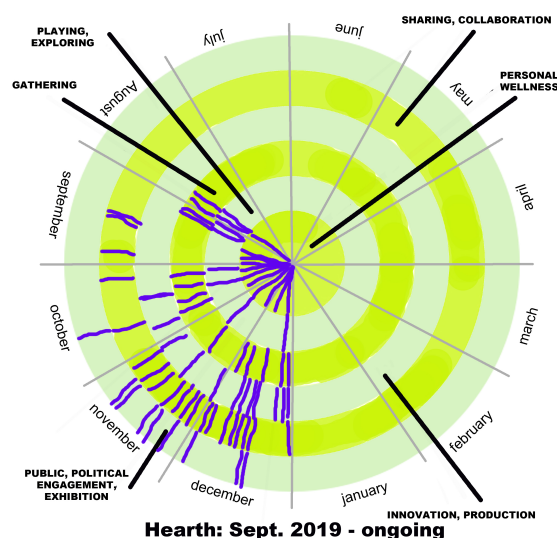
<sup>25</sup> In another example of this inextricable art/life cultural practice, making with children is borne of family responsibilities.

<sup>26</sup> By the end of the making sessions, students viewed pool noodles not as a bargain but as a cost to their local environment.

The forest installation of these whimsical, fraught, uncertain pieces created out of the curious hands and imaginations of children are an example of the joyful, creative acts in “the politics of everyday life” originating in the “local, here and now” (Braidotti lecture, 2014) that resonates with this time and this place, out of abject material. The *Foundlings* pieces can be fully appreciated as super-objects (Mazanti, 2011) for their embedded meanings: as sites of material explorations; as seductive, attractive colourful objects; as artifacts of social engagement and community-building on this remote island; and as potent symbols of the futility of “throwing away” non-biodegradable material. They emanate with their own history of their production, their journey from factory to forest, and their mix of whimsy and treachery. In the hands of the young makers these overlooked waste materials are transformed into active agents for social change through gathering and tactile engagement. Indeed, by developing an eye for the ignored and overlooked, students took the opportunity of a year-end field trip to a marine reserve to gather up more plastic debris for their additive sculptures, daylighting this devastating effect of global petroleum production in their own backyard.



**Fig. 4** *Foundlings*, 2019 (clockwise from top): “Insane Sometimes”, “Garbage Catcher”, “Little Worker”, installed on woodland plinths, Lasqueti Island, July, 2019. Photos: Carlyn Yandle



## Case study: *Hearth*

**Process:** Gathering, giving, washing, drying, ironing, cutting, ripping, stitching<sup>27</sup>

*Note: This ongoing project involved facilitating a weekly two-hour social stitching session from November 2019 to March 2020 at the inner-city Enterprising Women Making Art (EWMA) Studio, operated by Atira, a Vancouver-based agency that works to empower and support women<sup>28</sup> affected by violence, from housing to outreach, daycare to education. The screening process included a written application, criminal record check, in-person interview with Atira administrators, signed contract as well as a meeting to clear the project with the university's research ethics coordinator.<sup>29</sup> The core purpose of the Hearth project was to create a safe space for all participants to freely express themselves and support one another through the connective power of everyday material and methods, and toward a culture of shared desires. In*

<sup>27</sup> Companion column [posted](https://carlynyandle.weebly.com/blog/i-trust-this-log-cabin-will-create-some-heat) Nov. 5, 2019 at <https://carlynyandle.weebly.com/blog/i-trust-this-log-cabin-will-create-some-heat>

<sup>28</sup> That includes “anyone who identifies and lives full time as a woman and who experiences gendered violence and misogyny.”

<sup>29</sup> The activities with participants are not aimed at generating data in answer to research questions, qualifying the project for creative practice exemption from Research Ethics Board review.

*accordance to the conditions of working with Atira, the identities of the participants are kept confidential.*

When I moved back to the East End<sup>30</sup> of Vancouver a few months before this writing, I was committed to finding connection not just the residents on my block but the neighbours in the social housing projects, the shelters and the SROs<sup>31</sup> right around the corner. I found that vehicle for connection in a community quilt project that draws on the traditional quilting bee — stitchers sitting in the round, in collective activity — and the Gee’s Bend quilters specifically. The women in this multi-generational group are renowned for their improvisational, asymmetrical and abstract designs, and their use of old textiles that evokes their racially subjugated history in an isolated corner of Alabama.



*Women of Gee’s Bend in a quilting bee, Birmingham, Alabama, 2005. Photo: Andre Natta (Creative Commons CC by 2.0)*

Inspired by the hand-stitching and use of found materials, I devised a simple quilt-

block-building skill that anyone dropping by could pick up in a few minutes.<sup>32</sup> I envisioned that this activity could one day result in a single work for exhibition<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 5) but the focus would be on embracing “slow craft” for its ability to encourage reflection and imagination (Sennett, 2008). It would also serve as a political position against “pressures to speed up, to produce

<sup>30</sup> Childhood vernacular more inclusive than ‘Downtown Eastside’ or ‘Strathcona.’

<sup>31</sup> Single Room Occupancy units in downtown hotels, some renovated and some in horrific conditions

<sup>32</sup> While the theory is simple, the activity of running thread through layers of fabric can lead to a new appreciation of the labour involved in hand-stitched objects.

<sup>33</sup> Inspired by the 36-metre-long collaborative *Quilt of Belonging*, created 1998-2005. Read/watch more on this large-scale undertaking.

more, and to consumer more” (Bryan-Wilson, 2017) by engaging in hand-stitching with found fabrics.

For several consecutive months and in different East End sites, these ongoing sessions of pulling thread through cloth created an opportunity for sharing scraps, skills and stories. This time-based project is one of enriching relations, a long game of stitching together shared experiences in a space outside the dominant economic system.



*Each block in this mobile project serves as artifact of social-engagement sessions around various local tables. Photos: Carlyn Yandle*

The rhythmic, rote activity so conducive to easy conversation meandered around memories of other projects and other influencing makers, mothers, aunties, friends, current challenging situations and local conditions. It is a project of welcoming all to one table and revitalizing a shared culture of nurturing domestic activity through a contemporary art context.<sup>34</sup>

The project was initially conceived as a cathartic opportunity to memorialize friends, neighbours and loved ones who have fallen victim to the current epidemic of a toxic drug

<sup>34</sup> The connection between making and revitalizing culture can be seen as far as my ancestors' country of Finland, where in an effort to revitalize the Lapland culture is underway by "recreating old handcraft traditions with contemporary art methods" toward the larger project of strengthening cultural identity and decolonization.

supply<sup>35</sup> in the tradition of memorial quilts including the AIDS Memorial Quilt<sup>36</sup> and, more locally, the Downtown Eastside Women's Memorial March Quilt.<sup>37</sup> The log cabin block was chosen for its multiple layers of meaning. It stands as aspiration for (or futile gesture of) making a home in a city where homelessness is at an all-time high<sup>38</sup> and where affordable housing is increasingly scarce.<sup>39</sup> To assemble a log-cabin block is to experience architecture, beginning at the centre hearth — traditionally a hot or high-contrast colour — and spiralling out in lapping construction. It's a design that builds strength in the accumulation of even the thinnest scraps of cloth, adding a further layer of meaning: metaphor.



The Downtown Eastside Women's Memorial March Quilt, 2007. Photo: dəwn (Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In keeping with an a/r/tographical approach to learning through doing (Springgay and Irwin, 2008), any intention of introducing a larger narrative in this project was eclipsed by the various makers' interest in tactility over tactics: giving and receiving fabric scraps, organizing palettes, assembling and re-assembling pattern possibilities from the stacks of finished blocks. Clearly what is attractive in a city in the throes of an affordable housing and toxic-drug crisis is a reliable routine of light banter, tea and skills-sharing. This is the practice-based research that

<sup>35</sup> Aside from contending with the current global coronavirus pandemic, Vancouver is at the epicentre of this public health emergency, with more than 1,000 deaths due to toxic drug supply since the beginning of 2016, breaking records every year since 2014.

<sup>36</sup> The legacy of bold designer branding in the quilt (Bryan-Wilson, 2017) is another conceptual layer.

<sup>37</sup> Read more on the Women's Memorial March Quilt ([https://thisvancouver.vpl.ca/islandora/object/islandora:remembering\\_our\\_dtes\\_women\\_collection](https://thisvancouver.vpl.ca/islandora/object/islandora:remembering_our_dtes_women_collection))

<sup>38</sup> See the latest homeless count, as of this writing, here.

<sup>39</sup> See a snapshot of current statistics, as of this writing, here.

emphasizes theory as “reflective, responsive and relational” and “continuously in a state of reconstruction” with no pre-determined outcomes (Springgay and Irwin, 2008). The value of not needing to know (Jones, 2013) is essential in collaborative work, as is magical thinking about the range of possibilities for scope and display.



*Detail from Robert Rauschenberg's Bed, 1955. Paint on handmade log-cabin quilt, maker unknown. Photo: [profzucker](#) (Creative Commons [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#))*

Each block-object, then, can be viewed as an artifact of a specific moment of social engagement or as a stand-in for each of the individual makers in a collective whole. As the blocks align into a grid the work grows more evocative of the abstract expressionist movement in general (Ann Wilson, Agnes Martin) and more pointedly Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed*, 1955, in which a handmade log cabin quilt (maker unknown) was “used, transformed, and destroyed.” (Bernick, 1994)<sup>40 41</sup>

An important research outcome of this ongoing project is the reminder of the importance of adopting a “nomadic consciousness” in the terms of feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti (1994). Collaborating outside of the comfortable confines of one's own practice calls for flexibility and empathy and for embracing the notion that subjectivity is never fixed (2014) and that change is

<sup>40</sup> Artist Dorothea Rockburne, owner of the log cabin quilt at the time she and Rauschenberg both attended Black Mountain College (see *Space Craft* case study) recalled in *Art Quilt* magazine: “It was kind of special to me because I had it at the time my daughter Christine was born, and she used to spend a lot of time on it. I didn't actually give Bob the quilt, it just sort of appeared in the work one day.” (*Art Quilt*, 54, no. 104, as quoted by Bernick, 1994)

<sup>41</sup> Quilt historians would be able to situate its time and place and economic conditions of the making through examination of the unobliterated areas, and any quilter could appreciate the time required to create this hand-stitched bed-sized piece — all testimony to the rich cultural ground of found materials.

possible. The *Hearth* project is a fuzzy, warm form of political action that originates in personal practices<sup>42</sup> of gathering, of tactile engagement and of rote activity that open up consumption-free time to reflect, to socialize or to share ideas and ideals. This is a hands-on, embodied process of interweaving the self with interactions of others (Springgay and Irwin, 2008), a resistance to limited definitions of art and limited views of the power of making.



*Details of the Hearth collaborative installation: A simple and improvisational method of attaching tops of fabric strips to the wall in a lapping, log-cabin-block style using sewing pins.*  
Photos: Carlyn Yandle

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<sup>42</sup> Braidotti identifies feminist political engagement as in opposition to the binary storm-the-castle approach, starting from the body and connecting to others through shared desires.



**Fig. 5.** *Hearth, 2019-2020: Found fabrics, sewing pins, construction string, wooden spools, 16'W x 11'H. The planned two-day social engagement event to install the work was cancelled the previous day. The installation was completed March 16-17, 2020 by a small fraction of the project collaborators, five days after Covid-19 was declared a pandemic and two days before the university closed. Photo: Carlyn Yandle*




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## Reflection

In the eight years between earning my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and entering the Masters program in 2018, the world — and my world — have undergone a seismic shift, and so has the way that I make.

I had been enjoying a daily industrious studio routine, creating series of paintings conceptually related to textile and fibre-arts but composed of several layers of synthetic polymer, commonly known as acrylic paint. As the massive scale of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch<sup>43</sup> and the global plastics production system was becoming more understood<sup>44</sup> I could no longer ignore my own complicity. I began to view my painting studio — my sanctuary — as a toxic hoard and my heavily-layered paintings as just more non-biodegradable objects for purchase in a world drowning in non-biodegradable objects. I started casting around for alternative materials and methods but it took the collision of a personal setback and an environmental catastrophe to set me on the course of what would become the way I make today.

I was struck with sciatica just as the Japan tsunami hit in the spring of 2011. With limited mobility, I spent that time lying on my stomach watching the unfathomable footage flood in,

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<sup>43</sup> Watch: The Great Pacific Garbage Patch explained. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=29&v=0EyaTqezSzs&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=29&v=0EyaTqezSzs&feature=emb_logo)

<sup>44</sup> Plastic consumption around the world is now more than 320 million tonnes per year, with more plastic produced in the last decade than ever before (Lebreton, L., Slat, B., Ferrari, F. *et al.*, 2018). Read more.

some of it in real time. I had lived in Kyoto for 18 months in my early 20s, so the surging, colourful whirlpools of domestic objects, vehicles, houses were all too familiar. My frayed nerves drove me into the rote activity of braiding using whatever stretchy, petroleum-derived fabric scraps I could gather up from around my home. By the time I could return to a vertical position I had completed *Seismic Rug*: part abstract expressionist object, part domestic object; part model of deep ocean-floor earthquake that triggers tsunamis.

There was no pre-determined outcome in this very different work; it emerged in my high-tension state over this slow-motion disaster. As I played with the tension of the stretchy, lurid fabric strands, *Seismic Rug* seemed to generate its own power but I couldn't say how or why, and if it mattered. I could only use what I loved about the project — gathering unwanted materials, mining my own domestic hand-making skills, incorporating my immediate experience of the world — to explore further.

I've been told throughout my life not to over-react. Or that I'm over-reacting. To these statements of micro-aggression I say: I am not over-reacting; I am expressing an appropriate amount of reaction to some realities in my personal life, my neighbourhood, my city, and this planet. I connect with others who also react to systemic injustice and environmental disaster due to rampant, unchecked global capitalism. I respond to grassroots action, where making is core and often seen as "making trouble."

There is power in the material and the making: I see it in a fabric patchwork cluster of tents in the park around the corner, or in kids' hand-made jellyfish floating through a massive march through the major thoroughfares, or red dresses strung along a pipeline blockade, or in the construction remnants at yet another investment real-estate scheme jobsite. There is power in hand-making in reaction to personal anxiety, or public outrage, grief and loss, and power in the materials themselves that can be at once attractive and repulsive, sad and joyful.

I am deeply affected by these multiple layers of meaning in singular objects that twist together beauty with struggle, despair with hope, conflict with unity. And it inspires me to react.

I turn to my own making to reflect on these ideas, playing with materials in the space between these contrasting notions through the hands. What starts as a need to gather, to make, to connect emerges as a conceptual, aesthetic sculptural object *and* an artifact of social activity, of notions of time and of labour. Each of my objects may be seen as a piece of visual humour or political position but it's that possibility of creating something that holds the power to captivate out of nothing that anyone wanted that propels me to keep exploring what found materials can say. The material and the methods I turn to for solace, for self-care, for social connection often feel like they are reacting themselves. The work emerges, expanding beyond an art practice and into a broad-reaching cultural practice that knits in personal stories and public, political issues. It picks up where I left off in my previous career in newspaper journalism, engaging with readers over city issues. The connective tissue is now tactile and beyond language. It continues to feel around for new possibilities for addressing and redressing our wounds both individual and shared.

I am still making objects but the object of the making is finding agency in challenging material and situations through rote hand-making. It is a constant project of joyful action, reaction and connection in times of instability, injustice, distraction and fear.



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