Green Gold

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Fig. 1: *Where - Somewhere (19.4191562, -99.1426534 to 49.2676, -123.0924).* 2022. Henequén fibre, botanical dyes, re-bar, hand-woven leather handles. ECUAD Graduate Exhibition. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

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Abstract

"What does it mean to be here?" This was the initial research question of this thesis. Over the course of my MFA, I have lived in two countries: Canada (my birthplace) and Mexico. But the question of belonging is more than merely geographical. What began with a focus on questioning what it meant to belong in either country developed into an understanding of how knowledge creation develops in my practice. Through an iterative collaborative process with henequén fibre, I came closer to understanding childhood influences on my practice and politics in modes of making. With common Mexican materials, I began to learn and respect the unpredictable ecologies of plants and objects. This thesis is my attempt to make sense of our world through the social, corporeal, and sculptural components in my practice. It is a journey that will begin over and over again, and is led by my curiosity in the question: How have we been made?

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BELONGING

> Today, January 27, another family member has been lost to the
> ubiquitous virus we are living with in 2022.
> This loss becomes all the other losses in life and my
> day is punctuated by sobbing and a corporeal ache
> that draws me into a maelstrom of emotions.
> Today, I feel sadness of not having expressed more
> kindness or gratitude.
> Then without any conscious mental cue, I am sorry for
> myself, to have experienced so many deaths in life, to be,
> as my sister says, “orphaned”—not knowing where I belong.
> Today, I am slowly remembering where I can still feel a place of
> kinship and relationship.
> And as the day becomes the night, my son and I dance with joy, sadness
> and honouring. (Hennig, Journal Excerpt, 2022)

As the journal excerpt above highlights, loss impacts me in conscious and unconscious ways. In order to heal and find my ground, my behaviour following trauma has a pattern. I walk to sense my breath and cry to release physical and psychological constrictions. I touch another person, then I work obsessively in my studio. The questions I have been asking of late are, What patterns of existence brought me to my current sculptural/installation practice? What was I surrounded with in childhood?

Theory: Animism + Creativity

Animism is one of the central themes in my practice in the foundation of how I consider patterns of existence. An unintended consequence of working with material was recalling my childhood animism experiences. As Lange-Berndt states, "being complicit with the material means above all to acknowledge the non-human" (17). My haptic relationship with the material used in my thesis, henequén, was the primary communication pathway for experiencing its properties and agency—to reconnect with its energetic force and, through that relationship, more deeply acknowledge all human and non-human energies, their vitality and uniqueness. This acknowledgment requires that I participate in collaborative making that sometimes can be disruptive, disconcerting, and frustrating, especially when I am result-focused or wanting to control the process to achieve a quick outcome. I have learned that unravelling those politics and re-engaging in a listening process with the material clarifies how acting *upon* or acting *with* material is different.

In *Vibrant Matter*, political theorist Jane Bennett discusses the implications of acknowledging that life is universally present in everything from humans to rocks. She claims life is interconnected, constantly in process, and thereby creates complex interrelationships, entanglements, and proclivity for open-ended change. Her goal is to dissolve the binary between subject and object, and to show how all life has the capacity to "animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). Her intent is done without claiming horizontality or erasing all differences. Rather, Bennett seeks to dissipate the naturalized power structure and hierarchies of difference: not to perfect equality of actants but to hear or enhance our receptivity to that which is not expressed in words, and to allow space for humans to realize we are being made and acted upon, not just acting on others (104).

Bennett's work provides a conceptual framework for my process-oriented, collaborative, material experimentation practice. By listening to material in art making, whether in the selection of botanicals for dyeing henequén or in the process of presenting space for the interaction between two plants (dyes and henequén), or to considering ever changing installations, I am acknowledging the interaction of energies. My aim is not to demand an outcome of colour or form but have the "actants" be present and to live with a sense of wonder and unknown possibilities. In doing so, I attempt to exhibit an interconnected relationship between viewer-artist-material, which provides space for the viewer to witness our non-human/human connections as interwoven and interrelated.

A differing viewpoint is found in *Materiality*, an anthology edited by Petra Lange-Berndt. Unlike the views expressed in Bennet's book, these essays focus on incidences of when and how materials become agents within the artistic process. Lange-Berndt is an art historian who focuses on post-human relational networks and on living in and with nature. Within the anthology, a number of essays appear to describe humans acting upon the material in order for the material to become free. Lange-Berndt claims that being complicit with material is an intervention by humans that creates a disruption of social norms (17, 18). She also questions what it means to give agency to the material (13). I interpret *giving* agency to material as a continuation of an established power structure of human over non-humans through *granting* agency, rather than seeing and experiencing how non-human agency exists. Learning to learn from material is an important consideration within my studio practice.

The essays in *Materiality* do not embrace the universality of vibrant matter as Jane Bennett does, but they bring forth considerations of how the world of matter and material can be seen differently. Monika Wagner, an art historian and researcher focusing on material studies

and etymology, concludes that the aesthetic appreciation given to plain, simple material in the cultures of Asia, especially Japan, demonstrates a status that mediates between everyday culture and high art; this, she claims, is unlike West European cultures. Jiro Yoshihara, in "The Gutai Manifesto," speaks of calling the "material to life … how the human spirit and the material [spirit] reach out their hands to one another" (33). I recognize in Yoshihara's words the feeling of learning to work with henequén.

Animism questions the porous nature between humans and non-humans, between self and the world, and can interrogate the boundaries and borders we create and accept. I consider art making as not only an output or object. I have found meaning and personal transformation in the making that has allowed me to consider other aspects of my life. I have been investigating how I place myself in relationship to others and how that contributes to what both Bennett (14-17) and Franke, in his *Introduction to Animism*, describe as society's denial of our interconnectivity creating our planet's environmental and social destruction. Through those texts and observing my work I formed a greater understanding of my unconscious drive to create assemblages, an accumulation of multiples for installations. My desire was to regain a wholeness, to confirm the intimate connection between all material and, as Bennett states, a "culture of shared power" (34).

The development of an intimate engagement with material through questioning and learning its properties began in my sculptural practice. Themes of unravelling, assemblage, binding, cutting, shaping, and moulding resulted in an expressionistic sensibility that has a commonality with artists such as Eva Hesse and Sheila Hicks. As art historian Michele Millard argues, in her analysis of Hesse's work, "it is the repetition, unravelling, binding, and ordering of individual units of a piece that creates organic structures of expressive gestures" (24). A

comparable engagement with the serial and the unraveled is also inherent in my work, and is influenced by the previously mentioned artists.

Influences: Eva Hesse + Sheila Hicks

My first encounter with Eva Hesse's work was at a sculpture class focused on women artists.

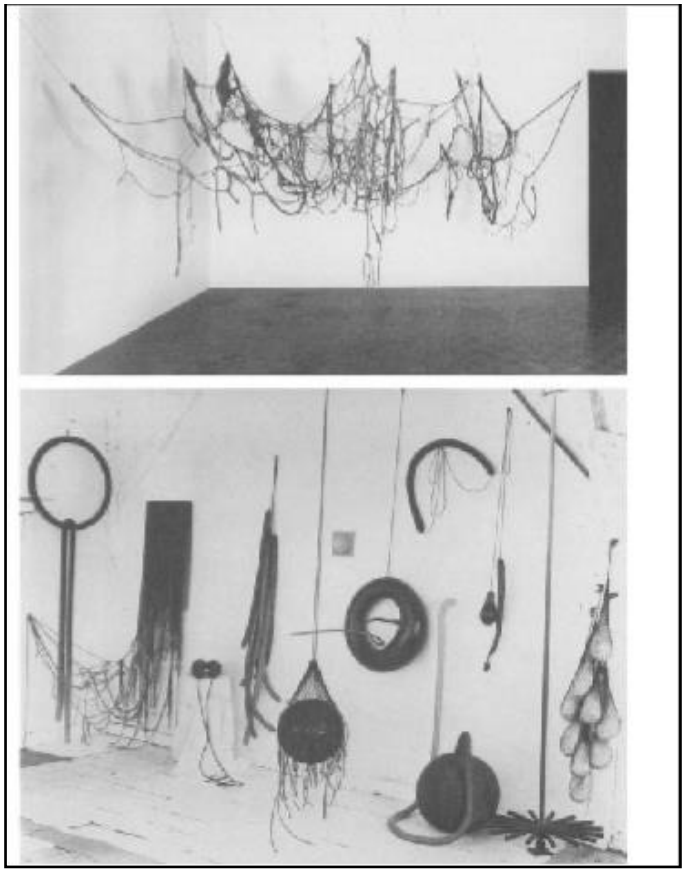

Fig. 2. Eva Hesse. Top: *Untitled (Rope Piece)*. 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Bottom: *Eva Hesse's Studio*. 1966, The Estate of Eva Hesse, Galerie Hauser, Zurich. "Eva Hesse Retrospective: A Note on Mileu," by Mignon Nixon, *October*, vol. 104, 2003, pp. 154.

I was initially drawn to Hesse's art by what I considered her playful curiosity and experimentation with found, industrial material (fig. 2, bottom). Like Hesse, I am drawn to a

natural engagement with material that develops a friendship between body and material. As Lucy Lippard puts it, “Hesse would sit with her materials like they were a creature” (qtd. in Mills 12).

Seeing these images of Hesse’s work (fig. 2) began an exploration of form with inexpensive, found, and industrial material centred on its properties. Within that process I began to consider Hesse’s personal history, and her significant relationship in defining the post-Minimalist movement through her material choices (latex, polyester, fiberglass) and processes. The material infused Hesse’s work with a sense of gravity, time, decay, and the body, reflecting the turbulence of the 1960s, her Jewish familial history during the Second World War and the post-traumatic stress fallout from that time (Thompson 22) (figs. 3, 4).

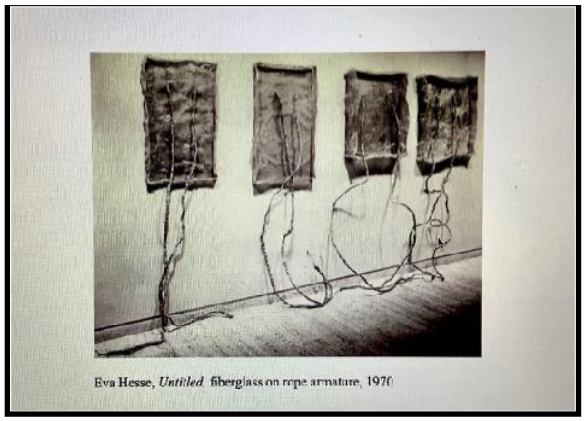

Fig. 3. Eva Hesse. *Untitled*. 1970. Fiberglass on rope armature. *Materiality as the Basis for the Aesthetic Experience in Contemporary Art*, by Christina Mills, 2009, University of Montana, MA thesis.

Fig. 4. Eva Hesse. *Repetition Nineteen III.* 1968. Fiberglass and polyester resin, nineteen units, each 19-20$^{1/4}$" (48-51 cm) x 11-12$^{3/4}$" (27.8-32.2 cm) in diameter. *Museum of Modern Art*, www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/eva-hesse-repetition-nineteen-iii-1968.

Artists such as Sheila Hicks, Jackie Winsor, Hannah Wilke, and Mira Schendel have used perishable materials like wood, fabric, and rope with processes of weaving, wrapping, folding, moulding, binding, and hanging. Elizabeth Wayland Barber's *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* describes the historical significance and paramount role of women making ephemeral fibre arts. As Laura Beth Thompson claims, Barber's text is vital "because these [contemporary fibre] artists, through their use of perishable material and methods, are reclaiming an important history. The implication is that these women accept mortality" (24). Anne Wagner's "What Women Do, or The Poetics of Sculpture" echoes how temporality features strongly amongst fibre artists. This is highly relevant to my work with henequén. Wagner states that "[t]hese women [fibre artists] knew they were not making monuments and did not design their art to last. … What these women did will not survive the centuries. Nor does it need to, given it has already ushered in change" (90).

Sheila Hicks's fibre sculptures fill the viewer's vision as they approach the artwork (figs. 5, 6). Hicks has led me to consider how the volume and size of an artwork, the visceral texture of

material, and its overall presentation can create a viewer-object relationship, and an engagement between non-human material and human material.

Fig. 5. Sheila Hicks. *La Sentinelle de Safran*. 2018. *MAK*, mak.at/en/sheilahicks.

Fig. 6. Sheila Hicks. *Pillars of Inquiry.* 2013-14. *Museum of Modern Art*, www.moma.org/magazine/articles/210.

Rachel Jones is a professor of continental philosophy, feminist philosophy, and aesthetics focused on consideration of the self and body, the sublime, sexual difference, and relations to materiality. In her paper "The Value of Not Knowing" she begins by alluding to feminist ethics

and perspectives that seek to "cultivate difference in ways that remain open to others … although unknowable and ungraspable by us" (1). Her premise is that the value of not knowing where we might be going in creating art leaves us open to new awarenesses. Within my practice I recognize that the "passionate state of not knowing is what makes us think, and ask questions" (1), and keeps us attentive to the unique singularity of others. My aim is to suspend, as Jean-François Lyotard advocates, the "active powers of the mind," and enter an arena that, as Jones suggests, will create beginnings, again and again, and a return to wonder and unlearning (4). My aim is to offer a possibility of inquiry to the viewer through using non-traditional materials that call to be acknowledged and create a sense of wonder. As Hicks states in her MoMA video, *Pillar of Inquiry*,

> If we used the same old material we have always used we'd never get to the moon if we always did it the same old way … I am using materials that have potential and new qualities and new abilities and … the idea is to have [the viewer] inquire … to look … to search for something.

I interpret Hicks's sculptural fibre installations to be about contemplation of the spiritual, something at a distance and beyond the body. I consider my work as forming a relationship between the human, non-human, and the environment within which we reside.

Storytelling

***The Season of Childhood*.** In Mexico, I reflect on being an outsider in places I temporarily call home, and how that shows up, or doesn't, in my work. I think of the Belgian-born artist, Francis Alÿs, who has resided in Mexico City since 1986, and how he wrote about his early years in Mexico City. He addressed his process of enquiry during that time by referencing his work,

Turista (Tourist): “At the time I think it was about questioning or accepting the limits of my condition of outsider, of ‘gringo.’ How far can I belong to this place? How much can I judge it? ... Where am I really standing?” (Ferguson 14).

Markus Miessen claims there is a role for the “uninvited outsider” (43-47), which I understand to not necessarily be a territorial exile but rather an independent risk-taker (perhaps an artist) who brings active questioning to the status quo. Miessen used the term as part of his architectural practice to encourage conflict as a space for dialogue, to discuss differences, rather than promoting superficial participatory engagement claiming collaboration in order to achieve political consensus (Frediani 98-111). I suggest that the term “uninvited outsider” can be transferred to how artists participate with communities and what awarenesses develop by commenting on historical references.

And, sometimes, in accessing the historical—geographically, socially, culturally—there is a looking-back to my own history. As Lyotard says,

> You cannot open up a question without leaving yourself open to it. You cannot scrutinize a “subject” … without being scrutinized by it. You cannot do any of these things without renewing ties with the season of childhood, the season of the mind’s possibilities. (100)

The foundation of my work and subsequent research begins with a story from my childhood, a return to the wonder of my childhood attentiveness to the non-human. During the relational and investigative process of art-making I began reconstructing and unravelling my formative years, to renew my connectivity to all life forms, and to construct an art practice with and through that knowledge.

Many of my childhood companions were found in nature. There were two influences that validated my propensity to acknowledge non-humans: my grandmother, Emily, and Ana-Maria, a family friend from Mexico. Grandma, a German immigrant to Canada, listened to the songs and voices of plants and trees, and never denied my capacity to do so as well. Ana-Maria introduced me to Mexico through photos, legends, and descriptions of her home: its landscapes, plants, and birds.

I was seven when our family met Ana-Maria and her family, who had recently arrived from Mexico. As was a common occurrence in our home, my parents invited new church members for Sunday lunch, and our weekly meals continued on for years.

At nine years old I visited Mexico for the first time, with my parents, at the promptings of our Mexican *amistades fraternas*. The journey was an introduction to the highly diversified and socially stratified Mexican culture, as well as to a southern ecological environment, including the henequén plant.

Plants have songs. When the agave plant gifted me its rich, mellow sound, my feet sank into the earth, and I became rooted into the ancient heritage of the plant and place.

As I worked with henequén over the last eighteen months, additional familial memories and artistic influences surfaced in my consciousness, beginning with a sensory recall: the warmth of my mother's body next to mine as she taught me to embroider or to read, the touch of my grandmother's hands and her voice as she guided my early gardening practice, or the sound of her scissors cutting through material as she designed and sewed clothing. The transformation of materials in the everyday became family traditions of textiles, horticulture, and construction.

Each time I have returned to Mexico City over the past ten years is also a coming-back to family connections. Since the fall of 2021, with COVID-19 travel restrictions, I have remained in

Mexico for periods of up to eight months, returning to Canada for only three months. The continuity of being in Mexico has created a deeper sense of place as I settle into increased understanding and connection to the culture and people. Yet, I also see how displacement exists around me and inside me—in the ongoing marginalization and exclusion of Indigenous people, who lack access to decent housing and public health services; the perpetuation of colonial behaviours of marginalization, violence, and land dispossession; and the influx of foreigners seeking sun and fun, and the resulting rising real-estate prices. All these present a disturbing reminder of how power and money can impact a country and its communities.

Travelling. Travel is an outward manifestation of transition for me. Mexico is my chosen country and Canada, my country of birth. I am a third-generation descendent of settlers, predominately of German and English ancestry. I have continually migrated west; born in Regina, Saskatchewan, adolescence in Calgary, Alberta, and adulthood in Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia. I question whether I must return to the "home" country in order to find, or be in, place. Or is there an opportunity to better understand what *being here* means in any landscape?

The complexities and challenges of living in Mexico are many: linguistic, geographic, cultural, political, ethical, and social—accompanied by a sense of both displacement and, occasionally, belonging. Francis Alÿs describes the artworks he made when he first arrived as "a means to situate myself in this colossal urban entity" (1). To situate myself here in 2021-22 I began using the common materials located in the *mercados* (markets) near my home, such as Mexican plastic tablecloths, to create collages and sculptures. By fall 2021 I ceased using toxic plastic materials and focused on the plant fibre henequén. I reconnected with a culture that was

part of my formative years, and openly re-established my early life values and connection to animism.

Materials

Oro Verde (Green Gold). Henequén (*Agave fourcroydes*) is grown in Yucatán, Mexico, possibly domesticated from the wild species, *A. augustifoliia.* The genus *Agave* includes 136 species. In Middle America, Indigenous peoples, predominately Maya, have used *Agave* for over nine thousand years, as a source of food, drink, and clothing; for the fabrication of container objects and rope; and for the creation of monuments during the pre-Hispanic period (Colunga-Garcia Marin 312).

Fig. 7. Henequén. 2022. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

English speakers will often refer to the commercial fibre twine—derived from both henequén and sisal *(Agave sisalana)*—as sisal hemp. In Spanish, the fibre is differentiated as either henequén or sisal. In Mayan, the fibres are referred to as *yaax ki* (greenish henequén) and *sacki* (whitish henequén) (Colunga-GarcíaMarín 313). The *tenderos* (shopkeepers) in El Centro de México use the Nauhautl name, *Ixtle.*

Fig. 8. Raw henequén being fed into cord/rope-making machines. 2021. Plantation Factory Cacalchén, Yucatán, Mexico. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Henequén fibre has a quiet presence and physical beauty. Touching strands like those depicted in figure 4 is akin to holding a flannel-covered down pillow, but in the manufacturing

process, either by hand or machine, the fibre hardens and becomes durable enough for cleaning implements, baskets, or marine rope, while remaining pliable enough for clothing. During the height of its global commercial value as marine rope, henequén was named *Oro Verde* (Green Gold) (see figs. 7, 8, 9).

Fig. 9. Henequén, five kilograms. 2021. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Seeing henequén in various forms—as a wild and cultivated plant, fibres drying in the sun, bundles waiting to be transformed, and strands being fed into machines—lent an intimacy and an empathy to the medium. The material became representative of the transitional states of the human body and its inherent repetitive labour.

Dyeing with Mexican Botanicals. I began my experimentation with henequén by infusing the material with botanicals. Using local dyes followed a tradition of botanical dyeing in Mexico, while building upon the herbal, dyeing, and textile teachings from my mother and grandmother. It was also an entry into conversations and relationships with women who were either currently using botanical dyes or who have relatives who did use, or are using, organic dyes.

Fig. 10. Andrea Hennig. *Twenty-six.* 2021. Installation, Mexico City, 150 x 50 cm. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

In my twenties, I obtained a Master Herbalist degree. Although I never pursued being a herbalist as a profession, that exposure to herbology has been influential in how I experience the world. The knowledge I obtained led me to appreciate the life force of botanicals for healing our bodies through the extraction of their medicinal properties. Now, I think of henequén and botanicals as co-creators in art making. The relational dyeing process is one of letting go of control and embracing a result that is often surprising and unpredictable. The variables are many and for that reason I am attracted to the process and the surprise factor—the accidental, as much (or more so) than the outcome.

Learning about Mexican botanical dyes in my process occurred in February 2021 with Lucy Hernandez.[1] She taught me how to dye and I introduced her to the use of common Mexican materials that could be used in the dyeing process. Lucy's intuitive approach to dyeing ("Let's see what magic we can produce today"), combined with her scientific knowledge, created an atmosphere of reciprocal experimentation and play and was in harmony with my process and approach.

Henequén fibre readily accepts dye. The infusion of the fibre with botanical colour enhances what I already experience as a vibrant material (fig. 9). Approaches to dyeing vary throughout the world; mine is one of knowing the scientific basics and then following my intuition. I use everyday vegetables (from red cabbage to achiote paste) and herbs. For example, *pericón*, a marigold with a minty-tarragon taste, is used medicinally, in cooking, and in rituals to ward off the devil. It yields a range of yellows in the dyeing process.

[1] Lucy Hernandez is a Mexico City clothing designer who uses natural dyes. She was introduced to me by another Mexican friend. Our relationship has developed into a friendship that has contributed to a sense of belonging and finding place in Mexico.

Knowledge Creation. Knowledge creation in my material experimentation practice develops through a collaborative, interactive process. My thesis exhibition, created in Mexico City with local plant material, was led by the research question: What does being here, being present mean? Although a broad enquiry, it is specific to places I reside, and encouraged further questions, such as, Will using local materials create an increased understanding of place or a sense of belonging?

Acknowledging the complexities of belonging, whether physically, emotionally, psychologically, linguistically, or intellectually, has been a process of coming into knowing, and is the crux of my exhibition thesis and support paper. That is, in the undertaking of an MFA, I entered a place of questioning: What else can this material become? What does it mean to work collaboratively with material? What else can I become? Memories and ideas once uncovered and revealed were investigated and further developed through conversations with material, texts, and people. In having to write an artist's position statement I grew closer to my familial knowledge and from there sought out texts to better understand how I am positioned in the world. My knowledge creation is dependent on all of the above strategies and more. This is not a hierarchal structure, but rather is a methodology that embraces a community of research approaches.

I came to the MFA unclear about my research methodology or how to articulate my practice within historical and contemporary relationships. I embarked on a process of knowledge seeking that could be described as filling up one vessel with information and understanding, only to find another empty vessel. My research during the past year began with a meandering walking practice through Mexico City. The combination of locating self in this environment with writing and studio research has led to past memories and awarenesses that had either been forgotten or

repressed. This resulted in an increased understanding of how I approach knowledge creation through a methodological approach, which is described as follows:

1. Walking, to observe, to see and to question the lens I am looking through, to question my responses, and allow time for reflection;
2. Conversation and engagement, with materials, the artworks of others, place, and locals, and to listen, to share, to learn;
3. Studio work, responding to the haptic experience of material, along with processes of unravelling, binding, cutting, moulding, assemblage, shaping, and engagement with the serial;
4. Listening and responding to my intuition—a bodily sensation of the mind settling;
5. Seeking feedback;
6. Acknowledging influences in artists, art history, writers, ancestral knowledge, past education, spiritual practices, religion, psychology, geography, place, and climate;
7. Situating self and material as witness to history through a disruption and interruption to the material's previous use;
8. Text and material research;
9. Writing, both journalling and poetry.

At each intersection in the pathway of learning I became immersed in one or more methods and methodological approaches to gain new perspectives or to abandon a point of view. I began to see how research *is* my practice, not distinct or separate from everyday life.

Works

Fig. 11. Andrea Hennig. *Tales from the Synthetic.* 2019. Unravelled polypropylene rope, roofing felt, 10 x 9' (3 x 2.7 m). Studio installation, ECUAD. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

First Residency at ECUAD. My interdisciplinary art practice began a decade ago with drawing, collage, and photography. It was when I enrolled in *Introduction to Sculpture* at the Vancouver Island School of Art that, without recognizing it to be so, I was about to return to and build upon the excitement and remembrances of early childhood influences of being nested in family traditions of textiles, horticulture, and construction.

In the first summer residency semester of the MFA at ECUAD we were asked to bring a material to class for discussion. As I stood before my cohort holding a short piece of one-inch thick, multi-strand, yellow, polypropylene rope, found at the marina I walked past on the way to class, and having no idea of what I would say, my hands began to unravel it into single threads, a release to hand and material collaboration, the extrasensory perception or psychometry that is a part of my material practice.

My first response was wonder and awe at the beauty and aliveness of this industrial material that was familiar to me from sailing in the Caribbean, Colombia, Panama, and Vancouver Island. In the handling of the rope in class my question became: What else can this material become or reveal? Upon reflection, this was not only about the material I held, but was a question I was posing to myself: What else can I become in this process of making art through what Donna Haraway describes as sympoiesis, "a making with" (58)—a release from self-imposed boundaries and restraints to engagement with materials and openness to the accidental?

My first project with this synthetic material was about deconstructing, not only the material but my preconceived ideas about art making. I was conscious of opening space for new learning in my MFA and *Tales from the Synthetic* was the conduit (see fig. 11). I became aware of how previously I would have a vision of an entire body of work, and how I used materials

towards that end. What I experienced with *Tales from the Synthetic* was a stronger noticing of what material pulled at me and how was I participating without an end product in mind.

In my time in Mexico, everyday materials have become a conduit for learning, to better understand the historical entanglements of this country's people, culture, and my place of belonging. Repurposing henequén is a departure from its use as a functional, commercial product, such as rope. I situate the material and myself as witnesses to history. The work becomes an interruption and disruption to its previous use, and in reconceptualizing the material I question the political, social, and cultural norms associated with its form.

***Latigos* (Whips).** The first *latigo*, depicted in figures 12 and 13, was constructed from the twenty-six henequén strands seen in figure 10, and was included in the Summer Interim Exhibition at ECUAD, 2021.[2]

Fig. 12. Andrea Hennig. *Latigo #1*. 2021. Henequén, hand-woven leather handles, 50 cm. Installation view, ECUAD Summer Interim Exhibition, 2021.

[2] Link to ECUAD Summer Interim Exhibition, 2021: cohereecuad.com/hennig.

Fig. 13. Andrea Hennig. Left: *Latigo #1*. Right: *Latigo #1* (detail). 2021. ECUAD Summer Interim Exhibition, 2021. Photos: Andrea Hennig.

The hand-woven leather handles were initially completed by Brenda Escalante with vegetable tanned leather sourced from her husband, José Luis, who makes leather goods. Brenda is a self-taught leather artisan. I paid Brenda for weaving all the handles onto the fibre and was fortunate to have her guidance and assistance in teaching the braiding technique to me. Our relationship developed into an appreciation of each other's connection with material and art. As acknowledgement of their craft and their support in my process of creating the *latigos*, I created and gifted a small backpack design to Brenda and José Luis that is now used in their commercial leather goods business.

In the fall of 2021, twenty additional whips formed the collection, *Latigos* (see fig. 14). Initially the strands of henequén appeared evocative of hair or whips. As I developed *Latigos* in

the first year of COVID-19, I began to reflect on the Black Death of 1346 and the flagellants' use of whips to atone for sins and expel the disease from their bodies.

Fig. 14. Andrea Hennig. *Twenty Latigos.* 2022. Henequén, hand-woven leather handles,

Later, as I learned of the political-social aspects of the henequén plantations, the whip form became symbolic of and belonging to racial capitalism and cultures of violence. The

Latigos series problematizes the whip as both punishment for self, which includes a kind of eroticism, especially within a religious history, as well as a punishment for labour, within colonization and plantation capitalism.

Fig. 15. Andrea Hennig. Left: *Bundle of henequén contemplating five latigos.* 2022. Right: *Still thou art.* 2022. Henequén, hand-woven leather handles, botanical dyes. Photos: Andrea Hennig.

***Nidos* (Nests).** At the same time as I was working on *Latigos* I began an exploration of handmade *nidos* (nests) made from henequén fibre. They are sold in *jarcerías* (shops for plant fibres) in El Centro de México or in bird supply stores in the local markets (fig. 16).

Fig. 16. Fernando Monroy Y Daniel, Tienda Yute, Pios. 2022. Cuerdas de México, "En El Centro," Mexico City. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Historically, *nidos* were made by the Maya peoples to encourage captured birds to build nests in their cages. Later, a *nido* cottage industry developed, which today is slowly declining as people consider the ramifications of imprisoning birds and animals.[3] My first purchase of twelve straw coloured *nidos* was based on a response to their sculptural form, and a reference to place and home. The *nidos* present as a duality: a concave vessel that holds the potential to be a carrier of knowledge or place, and a convex form suggesting cover, a dome protecting or hiding something. In 2021, I exhibited nine botanically dyed *nidos* in a 3 x 4 pattern, on a plinth and covered with a glass box, at ECUAD (figs. 17, 18).

[3] This information was received via personal communication in 2021 with Ana De La Concha, a visual artist and writer from Mexico City.

Fig. 17. Andrea Hennig. *Nidos* (installation views). 2021. Henequén, botanical dyes. ECUAD summer interim exhibition. Photos: Andrea Hennig.

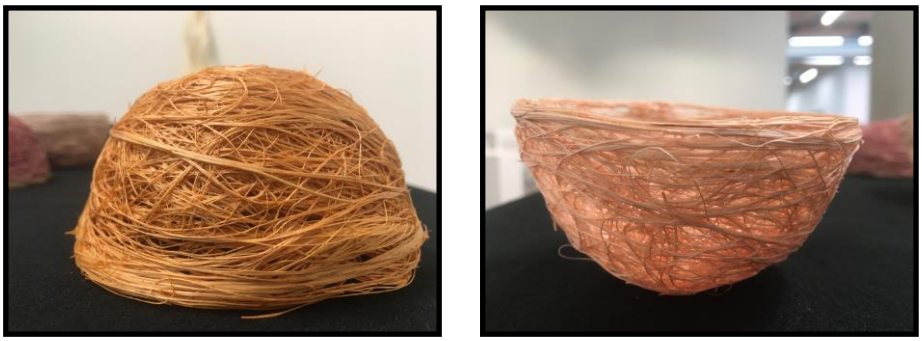

Fig. 18. Andrea Hennig. *Nidos* (details). 2021. Henequén, botanical dye. Photo: Andrea Hennig

The twelve *nidos*, contained in a glass-covered plinth, transformed to 1300 *nidos* placed on the floor, resulting in *Pile* (figs. 19, 20). The grid was disrupted. However, the neatly placed mass is evidence of a lingering need to control chaos and to create what I perceived as a contemplative, aesthetic assemblage.

Fig. 19. Andrea Hennig. *Pile.* 2022. 1300 *nidos*, henequén, botanical dyes, 1.3 x 1.2 m. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 20. Andrea Hennig. *Pile* (detail). 2022. Henequén, botanical dye. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Pile was installed in Bodega 13, an industrial building on a short street of mixed housing and industry located in Colonia Obrera, a neighbourhood in Mexico City considered part of the district El Centro. Our family business, located on the main floor, is used for the restoration and electrification of antique cars. It is an environment of disassembling and reassembling. The mezzanine is the business's studio, where friends, neighbours, designers, and mechanics gather. I use this space to experiment with installations, to document my work and seek input from viewers.

***Flux* (series).** Transforming *Pile* to other forms was a process of searching for a relational space for viewers. Through this, the series *Flux* developed. The daily shapeshifting between the various installations—*Pile*, *Being Held*, *Naga*, *Departures #1*, *Departures # 2*, *Swarm*, *Travel Routes*, and *Thinking of the Fencong Hills*—is a visual reflection of my artistic and personal transformation while living in Mexico City (figs. 20-28).

Fig. 21. Andrea Hennig. *Being Held.* 2022. Henequén, botanical dye, 1300 *nidos*. 1.8 x 0.76 m. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 22. Andrea Hennig. *Nagas*. 2022. Henequén, botanical dye, 1300 *nidos*. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 23. Andrea Hennig. *Departures #1*. 2022. Henequén, botanical dye, 1300 *nidos*. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 24. Andrea Hennig. *Departures #2*. 2022. Henequén, botanical dye, 1300 *nidos*. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 25. Andrea Hennig. *Swarm*. 2022. Henequén, botanical dye, 1300 *nidos*. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 26. Andrea Hennig. *Travel Routes.* 2022. Henequén, botanical dye, 1300 *nidos*. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 27. Andrea Hennig. *Travel Routes* (detail, side view). 2022. Henequén, botanical dye, *nidos*. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 28. Andrea Henning. *Thinking of the Fengcong Hills.* 2022. Henequén, botanical dye, *nidos*. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

In *Flux* there is a dichotomy and fragility of home, of being held or not, of nesting together or separating and occasionally belonging. The shift in form was based on childhood memories, as in *Thinking of the Fengcong Hills* (fig. 28) and *Being Held* (fig. 21), while *Departures* (figs. 23, 24), *Swarm* (fig. 25), and *Travel Routes* (figs. 26, 27) were depictions of transitions. The process exemplifies how aesthetic choices, although intuitive, are often routed in the unconscious, leading towards what can be understood only in hindsight. The variations brought to mind a longing for connection to place, a memory of finding place, or setting out on a journey to find the unknown. Upon reflection, I see the *Flux* series as a process of growth, a cumulation of concepts still in development. *Flux,* and *Latigos*, reflect the social, corporeal, and sculptural components that reflect my heuristic processes of working with material. The *Flux*

series is an example of repurposing a commercial, functional product, and situating the material and myself as witnesses to history. The work becomes an interruption and disruption to its previous use, and in reconceptualizing the material I question political, social, and cultural norms associated with its form. For example, the *nidos* were used for generations to encourage captured birds to build nests in their cages. This practice of imprisonment raises issues of non-human and human relationships that have existed for centuries, and in doing so can trigger thoughts of our vulnerability to being captured or displace. And is that not a form of crisis, transitioning form one way of thinking to another?

Thesis Exhibition.

Fig. 29. Andrea Hennig. *Where - Somewhere (19.4191562, -99.1426534).* 2022. Henequén fibre, botanical dyes, hung on re-bar, 1.2 x 2.7 m. Installation, Bodega 13, Mexico City. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

Fig. 30: *Where - Somewhere (19.4191562, -99.1426534).* 2022. Henequén fibre, botanical dyes, hung on re-bar, 1.2 x 2.7 m. Installation, Bodega 13, Mexico City. Photo: Andrea Hennig.

My thesis exhibition developed as I looked back to the beginnings of my graduate program and the artwork created. Presented as a rectangle, twice the size of the global averaged female body, *Where - Somewhere (19.4191562, -99.1426534)* is designed to fill the viewer's vision as they approach. Hanging from structural rebar in Bodega 13, it provides both a temporary connection to location and a relational dependency upon place. *Where -Somewhere (19.4191562, -99.1426534)* is made of raw fibre that appears delicate but has tensile strength. Its limited life span is evident through the engagement of natural dyes and plant fibre. Like our transitory human body, *Where - Somewhere (19.4191562, -99.1426534)* exists in one form in its life stage, and is presented as an acknowledgement of its material uniqueness. The work also addresses animism and becomes a contemplation on the formation of relationships between the human, the non-human, and the environment in which we reside.

Impermanence features predominately in my work. *Where - Somewhere (19.4191562, -99.1426534)* given its fragility and temporal nature can lead us to question our own mortality and what may lie beyond this life.

Fig. 31: Andrea Hennig. W*here - Somewhere (19.4191562, -99.1426534).* 2022. Left: front view. Right: detail. Henequén fibre, botanical dyes, hung on re-bar, 1.2 x 2.7 m. Installation, Bodega 13, Mexico City. Photos: Andrea Hennig.

Reflection

Being in the MFA program has been a journey between two countries accompanied by companions, human and non-human. I travelled back in time to early life experiences that revealed connections to my artistic practice. I explored how to be in place and to belong within a landscape, whether that is my body, my practice, a family, or a country—only to learn again the transitory nature of existence.

What does it mean to be here? I am still in the process of understanding the question and the answers. I am learning to settle, to come into the relationship of being with self and others in both countries. As I reflect on the transitory nature of the work I created for my thesis exhibition, and its evident cycle of decomposition, I feel its vulnerability as it exists in this moment, to be what it is….and that too is a settling.

As I reflect on the thesis defense and the final question that was offered for reflection ("What is my engagement with issues of labour, land and time?"), I think of the context within which I work, in the urban metropolis of Mexico City. I am separated from the land on which henequén is grown and prepared for commercial use, the animals from which leather is taken and tanned, and the farms where the botanicals were grown and harvested. I am a recipient of the labour of others through a monetary exchange.

I had the privilege to travel to Yucatán for one day to experience the commercial production of henequén and initiate what I hope will be a future relationship with the workers engaged in the growing, harvesting, and manufacturing of that fibre. If I am fortunate enough to work on the plantation as an artist and in harvesting the plant, I will gain new insights into the relationships that exist between the plantation owner and his employees, and the harvesters and the plant. I am curious as to what history the land holds for the people in the area, what generational relationships exist amongst the people with the plant and the land, and how my

relationship will change with the material and within my art.

My relationship with henequén as an outsider is not dependent on working to sustain my life or provide for my family. Rather, my connection to the material is one of wonder that began in childhood. As an artist, I live in appreciation of its history, beauty, strength, and aliveness. Working with material, however, has become greater than exploring its properties. It has become a conduit for questioning the relationships that have developed culturally by its existence on the land and my response to those relationships. The material has led me to connections with people, to different areas of Mexico, and to a history that will continue to be revealed over time. I recognize that, in my engagement with the material and the creation of artwork, I am participating in developing history as well.

At the conclusion of my MFA, I feel a loss of leaving what has been an intense concentration and research exploration within a structured student life. I also feel an excitement of taking what I have learned from the past two years into my practice. I have created work with a questioning mind. I have learned that to begin over and over again results in finding place, whether that be in writing a thesis or with material. Where I had lost my profound connection to nature, I found it again in the urban sprawl of Mexico. Where I saw only meaning and significance in other artists' work, I began to see meaning in mine. Where I felt outside an artistic tradition, I found how I was situated in the contemporary and to the past. Now, I step into the future accompanied by knowledge, to continue creating and recreating.

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