Wild Hair

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To Diana, Norma, and June, for the gift of matriarchal wisdom I give thanks.

This work would not have been possible without the generosity and guidance of my supervisor, Randy Lee Cutler. I am so grateful.

A wholehearted thank you to all my guides throughout this journey; you have left your impression upon me.

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Abstract

My object of inquiry and main artistic muse is human hair. Through a research-based interdisciplinary practice, I am investigating hair as an art material. I am drawn to connect with hair as an energetic object, a vibrant material made of human cells, one that retains the energy of its human host even after it is physically disconnected. Using the techniques of stop motion animation, solar printing, assemblage, and interdisciplinary craft, I explore methods for collaborating with and expressing the vital energy of hair, as defined by Jane Bennett in the book *Vibrant Matter*. Hair has been widely used in ritual and art throughout history and possesses a supernatural potential. It also carries immense social and political weight. With this in mind, I approach this work with care and conscientiousness. In this practice, I draw upon the spiritualist movement, my matrilineage of craft, the histories of craftspeople who have also worked with hair in the production of ritual objects, and my generous hair donors.

Acknowledgments

I reside on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, which includes the Lummi Nation and the Nooksack tribe. Unceded means that this land was occupied and stolen, not relinquished by the original inhabitants. I extend my respect to those original residents and their lineage, with gratitude for their continued care and reverence for the land. As an uninvited guest, it is my duty to work towards supporting Tribal sovereignty and a continued awareness of the history of these stolen lands.

As an able-bodied white woman residing in the United States, I recognize my privilege and ability. I would like to extend the concept of bodies to ALL bodies, human bodies, living non-human bodies and organic bodies existing in nature. All are active participants and constituents in an interrelated web, all are subject to violence and abuse. As a queer eco-feminist, I believe it is my responsibility to actively respect and acknowledge the interconnectedness of all things, working toward situated understandings and a decolonial and antiracist future.

> "Not only do we see, hear and feel in radically different ways, one person to the next, but the ways we use our senses and bodies are historical: what we see and feel is made possible by the cultural conditions that structure our understanding of what is possible, what is impossible, and what is even there to be sensed at all." (Hall, 1).

I endeavor to be aware of the histories of violence enacted upon bodies. As hair comes from/is a product of bodies, it too is subject to repressive and violent structures that extend to whomever it was attached to. I intend for my work with hair to extend a respect and reverence for this material that acknowledges inherent power structures and their role in shaping our myriad histories and perceptions.

It is worth mentioning that this thesis project refers largely to my experience as a white woman in the United States, and the hair utilized in this work is primarily from white people. In orienting myself towards hair, I have extensively researched the history of European imperialism, structural violence and racism surrounding hair. In all honesty, I haven't felt wholly comfortable working with the hair of Black folks or people of color. I don't want to seek out and include this hair purely as a performative gesture, and I don't want to objectify, bind, or use this hair in any way that might echo the violence enacted upon bodies of color. Both the inclusion and

omission of Black hair feels problematic, for different but equally significant reasons.

In this work, I have chosen to speak to my own personal experience around hair, thereby excluding entire populations. I have relied on a small group of donors that is reflective of my local and immediate community, which is also somewhat homogenous and primarily white due to historical racism and structural violence against people of color. I bring this awareness forward with the acknowledgement of my shortcomings and the intent to broaden my practice in the future to create more inclusivity and diversity in representation.

Fig. 1. Jes Bonin, *Apparitions (detail),* 2022. Toned cyanotype on linen, 11”x16”.

Introduction

This thesis utilizes artistic research in the pursuit of a heightened awareness of the materiality of and mythology surrounding human hair. I am investigating hair as biological detritus, how it is used in ritual and art, how it comes from bodies and comes to represent bodies, particularly post-mortem. My work explores a variety of ways one can collaborate with materials and their vital energy, illustrating how interacting with human hair keeps me in the company of others, both living and deceased.

Hair is composed of keratin proteins and lipids, which are surrounded by a cuticle of dead cells. Hair strands grow from individual bulbs, fed by capillaries inside each hair follicle (Yang, 1). Hair possesses DNA and an almost geologic record of human activity via cellular record. It has the energy of an organic material. It has a physical memory. It interacts with its environment via forces like heat[1] and humidity[2]. Hair

[1] Exposure to heat changes the shape of hair's keratin strands.
[2] Hydrogen bonds occur when molecules on neighboring keratin strands each form a weak attraction with the same water molecule, thereby indirectly bonding the two keratin proteins

also carries considerable cultural symbolism and historical weight as a material. The magnitude and scope of the affect/effect of hair on humanity is vast and complicated; I have only begun to scrape the surface of this topic[3].

Within the histories of human hair lie the clues to how our perceptions of it have been shaped by culture, religion and power structures. In the article "Body Hair Battlegrounds", Breanne Fahs states that hair is

> "...a vehicle for social control, displaced anxiety, intense emotional energy, and cultural distress. Hair is at once a marker of social class and "respectability," a highly racialized site of inequality and difference (particularly for African American women), a deeply gendered signifier of beauty and gender (non)conformity, and a form of artistic and cultural expression; it is messy and complex and always-already laden with stories about power." (Fahs, 2019, 11).

I see evidence of this in my own life history, and am drawn to research these complex dynamics, utilizing the information to both speak to and move beyond perceptions and prescribed limitations to a utopian and antiracist future.

Through historical and artistic research, I am seeking evidence of ways that human hair has been an object of power and magic, further contextualizing my own physical experiments with hair. When I use the term magic, I refer to the supernatural, that which cannot be empirically explained, phenomena or entities that are not subject to the laws of nature. Concurrently, I am interested in the ways that hair embodies a vital materiality (Bennett, 2010). In *Vibrant Matter,* Jane Bennett discusses the idea that objects have an inherent agency and an influential interconnectedness with other objects in their environment, referred to as "thing-power" (Bennett, 2010, xvi). These objects are active participants in ongoing interactions with their surroundings. In my creative practice, I try to interact with hair as a listening collaborator, in an effort to help express this agency. Hair as a material object seems to have a "mind" of its own; I am drawn to its enigmatic

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together. Because humid air has much higher numbers of water molecules than dry air, a given strand of hair can form much higher numbers of hydrogen bonds on a humid day. When many such bonds are formed between the keratin proteins in a strand of hair, it causes the hair to fold back on itself at the molecular level at a greater rate.On the macro level, this means that naturally curly hair as a whole becomes curlier or frizzier due to humidity." (Stromberg, 1)

[3] According to some researchers, when humans evolved to relative body hairlessness the head hair remained as a subject of sexual selection (Wade, 1).

qualities and am interested in observing and studying the "laws"[4] of hair, investigating how these laws relate to the idea of hair having agency and energy (Bennett, 2010). An email from professor Alla Gaddasik said it eloquently: "sculpting and animating with hair allows us to imagine a life for hair beyond human subjectivity and entanglement."

Experimenting in a variety of mediums, including stop-motion animation, cyanotype printing, collecting, and sculpture, I seek to explore the orientation of hair. The concept of orientation, discussed in the book *Queer Phenomenology* by Sarah Ahmed, describes the physical position of something or someone relative to the environment they exist in. It describes an entity's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs. It can also refer to one's familiarization with something; in orienting myself towards hair, I hope to get closer to having a situated understanding.

Methods + Methodologies

Interdisciplinarianism: Adaptive Techniques in Shape-shifting

Fig. 2 Jes Bonin, *Experiments in sewing with hair*, 2021.

My artistic practice is rooted in craft. I was raised by a group of women who prioritized handwork and homemaking as a necessary element of life. They taught me that craft is about process and knowledge-sharing...it is a slowing down, an

[4] As described by American textile artist Anni Albers in the essay "Material as Metaphor".

intimacy with materials, and a pursuit of intricacy and care applied to the creation of common everyday useful objects. “Craft is dependent on knowledge that is tacit, practical or embodied, learned from watching other people practicing a skill.” (Harrod 15). I emulated my elder matriarchs as they mentored me in the myriad ways of using my hands as a means of empowerment. Today, this practice keeps me connected and in conversation with these women, even though they are deceased. It has become a powerful method of processing grief and loss through artistic procreation.

Textile work was one of my earliest mediums; I was sewing my own clothes as a small child, finding embodied ways of expressing my identity through fabric. Sewing and crafting fostered connection and community. As a young child, making things was a way of passing time, expressing my creativity, and manifesting beautiful objects from thin air. To my friends, this seemed like magic or a superpower. As an adult, this handed-down knowledge has come to represent resilience and autonomy. According to sociologist Richard Sennett, “The craftsman can sustain his or her self respect in an unequal world.” (Harrod, 16). Crafting empowers me to make the things I cannot afford, embodying the values of thrift, ingenuity, patience, and tradition. It also functions as a small gesture of protest against the larger capitalist structures of mass-production and labor exploitation. Today, my use of craft comes intuitively and subconsciously; it is a tacit knowledge. I can move fluidly between mediums and often hybridize techniques[5], seeking new forms of expression using tried-and-true methods. I often innovate by radically altering techniques and experimenting with unconventional materials, creating new and emergent[6] approaches. As Natalie Loveless describes in *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, the concept of interdisciplinarity-as-emergence is “productive of outputs that exceed what is demonstrably present in their constituent parts.” (26). As a craftsperson, I have found a fruitful and bountiful language of expression in these shape-shifting processes of making.

[5] Hybridizing, in the case of my artistic practice, refers to an unconventional intersection of techniques and materials, such as combining photography with textiles, or in utilizing basketry or upholstery methods with hair.
[6] The concept of emergence as described by Donna Haraway in *the Companion Species Manifesto* refers to relationships that are in flux, in reciprocity with one another, and still developing.

Fig. 3. Jes Bonin, *Soft Armor* (detail)*, 2021.* Experiments in fabric solar printed with hair.

It's Alive! In Conversation with Energetic Materials

Bennett's theory of new materialism explores the ways that "so-called inanimate objects have a life, that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy...a kind of thing-power." (18). In collaborating with human hair, I seek to recognize the vibrant energy it possesses, investigating the possible agency within. I wonder, can hair tell its own story?

My mother was a children's book illustrator. I spent my youth immersed in the magical world of her construction, one of possibility and potential wherein animals, trees and rocks were sentient beings. Growing up, this wasn't mysticism, it was the way I framed and perceived reality. As a result I have always lived in a world of naive ambition similar to the one that Bennet describes, leading with an innocent curiosity that perceives objects or spaces as alive, haunted or charged by their past. This material spirituality is often referred to as animism, but within my praxis, I

choose to frame it as matrilineal wisdom.[7] Interacting with material, I seek to understand its energy or aura. Attempting to tap into this, I "render manifest" …both to receive and to participate in the shape given to that which is received." (Bennett 17). This heightened sensitivity leads me to deeply care for the spaces I inhabit and materials I work with in gestures of respect and reciprocity.

Fig. 4. Jes Bonin, *Experiments with photographing hair in natural environments*, 2022.

Hair as ritual object, art material, or tool of divination seems to have the ability to extend beyond its material existence and have otherworldly powers. As a devotional object, hair can even bring one closer to the divine. Evidence of this can be found in Victorian mourning jewelry, in ancient Buddhist hair embroideries[8] *(Fig. 5)*, and in battle and sexual rituals across the globe. The power of hair is reiterated and perpetually reinforced by literature, imagery, written and oral histories, religions and mythologies. According to anthropologist E. R. Leach, "magical power typically resides in objects which are detached from individuals in ritual situations." (162). In rituals across the globe, anthropologists concluded that "Hair stands for the total individual or for the soul, or for the individual's personal power (mana)" (162). Ancient societies took part in elaborate ritual disposal of hair, believing "…that a "sympathetic connexion" persists between a person and everything that has once been part of the person's body." (Gitter 942). In myriad ways, people have upheld the belief that hair has a potency and potentiality that surpasses its obvious physicality. I am interested in the ways that my work with hair might access this magical and energetic potential.

[7] Animism, both a concept and a way of relating to the world, attributes a sentience or vital force to plants, animals, forces of nature, and inanimate objects.

[8] In imperial China, hair embroidery was considered to be the "highest form of devotional embroidery…a practice of miraculous spiritual power." (Li, 132) The hair in these embroideries represents both filial piety and a symbolic gesture of regeneration; in particular, women's hair was often used as an offering to deities.

Fig. 5, Guan Dausheng, Buddhist hair embroidery, Guanyin (detail), 1262-1319. Human hair on silk, embroidery, 105×50cm. *Public Domain.*

Li, Yuhang. "Embroidering Guanyin: Constructions of the Divine through Hair." *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* (2012): 131-166

Intuitive Meandering as a Path to Enlightenment

There is an intangible and elusive aspect of the creative practice that is often described as intuition. In the article "Are the Muses Real? Intuitive Inspiration, Possession and Dissociation", author Paula Thompson states that, "A common denominator of intuition is a feeling of knowing and "knowing without knowing why" (217).The journal article by Felix Palezuelos, entitled "A Philosophical Perspective on Intuition as Method within Artistic Process", describes intuition as "the spontaneous understanding of a situation or problem as a hunch or gut feeling–an innate instinct that unconsciously and directly produces insights...knowledge acquired directly, immediately, self-referentially, non-conceptually, without the intercession of the intellect, unmediated by academic or scientific methodologies, or formal, disciplined, logical discourse." (1). Put simply, intuition exists as a flash of clarity, an "ah-ha!" moment, a perfect idea which arrives seemingly out of the blue. In my practice, this tacit knowledge shows itself in the form of new emergent ideas and innovations. Oftentimes I move between several projects at once, hastening to resolve works, stuck in a state of perpetual distraction or bored tedium. This is often when a new idea presents itself. The science of intuition was studied in 1948 by psychoanalyst Theodor Reik in the book *Listening With the Third Ear*, wherein he describes how "the process has none of the characteristics of a conscious act. It is situated in [brain] zones that are inaccessible to our efforts of thought and it's almost un-thought." (254). I rely on these un-thoughts, this clearing of brain static. By allowing myself to meander, I make space for innovation. The anthology *Technologies of Intuition* explores artists who use intuition in their artistic practice. One common denominator, as art historian Jennifer Fisher describes, is that

“Intuition presents a reflexive and innate form of knowing – an inner guidance that refers to implicit insight. Engaging intuition also entails the simultaneity of inward and outward focus in order to grasp a situation as a whole.” (11). This type of focus and attunement is an integral part of my studio practice. The goal of intuition is to access and synthesize the engrained and accumulated knowledge acquired over time.

Feminist Scholar Donna Haraway’s concepts of making-with and becoming-with (2016) have influenced the ways I interact with material. I interpret these ideas as symbiotic collaboration, a way of working together with elements which requires attunement and sensitivity. In my work I also sometimes utilize psychometry, channeling, clairsentience and claircognizance, accessing my hands or my mind’s eye to read an impression. In my research and practice I employ no single practice exclusively; I utilize a hybridized method which takes into account many approaches, working fluidly between them in an attempt to listen to and collaborate with a material’s vibrant energies gently and respectfully.

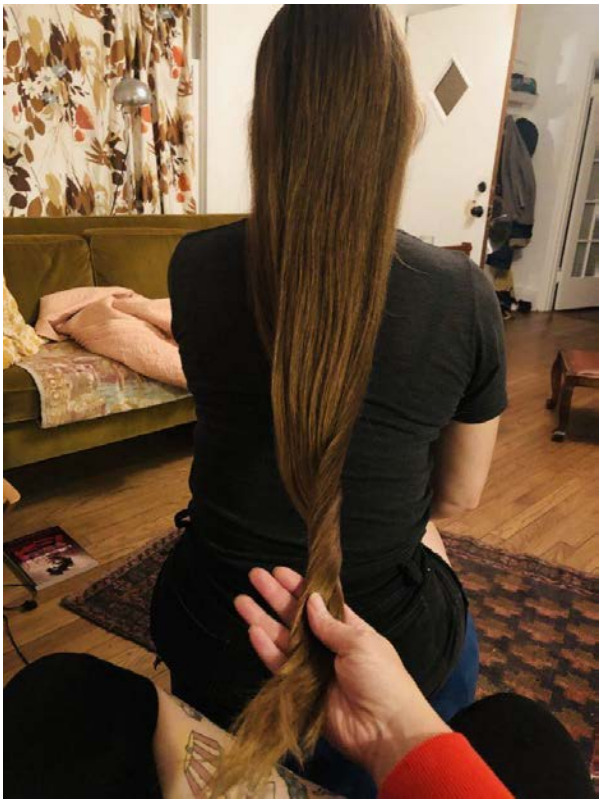

Fig. 6. Jes Bonin, *Brushing Ashley’s hair*, 2021.

Fig. 7. Jes Bonin, *Solarprinting with Ashley*, 2021.

Fig. 8. Jes Bonin, *Ashley's Imprint*, 2021. Solarprints on thrifted bedsheet, dimensions variable.

More is more: strategies of focused hoarding

> Objects, particularly old ones, have witnessed all sorts of events and lives, and bear their imprint...If you wish to make their content visible through the

> use of a camera, then you have to listen to them...You have to become a collector and only then a film-maker...Don't tell your own stories with the help of subjects (objects) but tell their stories."
>
> Jan Svankmajer

In my interactions with materials, I find myself always interested in the bigger picture of how they came to be and the ways they act and exist independent of my intervention. I am drawn to materials that tell a story of their own existence, which I then tease out and reinforce with my own creative research. Collecting as a practice helps me illuminate and reflect on nuanced differences that exist within monolithic categories. Artist and theorist Gordon Hall delineates that "... An implied multiplicity is very different than the substitution of a monolith." (1). Examining the sometimes hard-to-see subtleties that exist within a collection is one way I symbolically and metaphorically resist ideas of sameness and address concepts of diversity. For example, within my collection of hair are myriad shades of each color. The category of "Blonde" does little to accurately describe the subtle differences therein. Pinned to a corkboard, the hair specimen read vaguely like a taxonomic chart, accentuating the differences therein *(Fig. 9)*.

Fig. 9. Jes Bonin, *Hair Collection*, 2021-ongoing.

Collecting is an inherited family practice. My mom collected from thrift stores, garage sales, and eBay, and I do too. My grandmother was a full-blown hoarder. In my experience, collecting represents the thrill of the hunt, the dopamine release of the score, and a relentless search for containment, categorization and control in a chaotic world. Through my upbringing I have come to appreciate the way a collection has an energetic presence that a single object does not. I have carried this philosophy into my studio practice; once a collection has formed, the volume of materials begins to tell a story. As a collaborator, I feel beckoned to intervene, working with material to transcend its original manifestation. Anni Albers echoes this sentiment in her essay "Material as Metaphor". "Something speaks to us, a sound, a touch, a hardness or softness, it catches us and asks us to be formed. We are finding our language, and as we go along we learn to obey their rules and their limits...The more subtly we are tuned to our medium, the more inventive our actions will become. Not listening to it ends in failure." (1982). Collecting allows me to acquaint myself with my material more completely and begin to speak its language.

It takes a village: generative participation

Throughout my trajectory as an artist, I have repeatedly called upon my community for help. This may come in the form of a social media survey calling for donations or input. It may appear as a phone call to a neighbor for supplies, or to a local artisan for technical advice. I often refer to technical tutorial videos online and hard copy manuals for lessons on new techniques. I am constantly gleaning from a vast community of generous individuals, and without them my work would not be possible.

This thesis project relies on a collection of human hair. In the middle of 2021, I posted a request on Instagram asking for hair donations, and received several. They came from near and far, in envelopes and ziplock baggies and crumpled brown paper bags, in the mail or hand delivered to my front porch. I received white blonde baby haircuts, frizzy matted clumps, and long thick black ponytails shorn by the season. Each piece of hair told a story. I also have a close connection to a salon owner and hairdresser in my hometown. When doing drastic haircuts, she asks each client's permission to donate their hair to me with the explicit knowledge that it will be used in artwork. Most of these donors remain anonymous to me, but sometimes I will see a photo. I received braids and ponytails of all shapes, shades and sizes; these locks would typically be thrown in the trash. I am humbled by the

generosity of these folks, and extend immense gratitude to donors known and unknown for their trust and confidence.

The isolation of Covid-19 led me to utilize social media and digital space as a way of involving people in my work, thereby fostering connection. Through the act of collecting and working with human hair, I was able to engage with people intimately at a time when physical closeness was hard to come by. I was able to see the exciting potential in cooperative art practices, even when in-person collaboration was risky at best. I am deeply inspired by Marie Watt, a Seneca Nation artist who utilizes the quilting bee practice to make large scale works. “Through collaborative actions, she instigates multigenerational and cross-disciplinary conversations that might create a lens and conversation for understanding connectedness to place, one another, and the universe..” (Watt). I hope to move toward this type of work as a form of community-building activism which creates the potential for inclusivity and visibility.

I tried to honor people’s hair donations by engaging with them personally, sending images of their hair in process or in the work. Sometimes social media posts of work-in-progress would incite discussions or stories that would influence the trajectory of my research. People not only donated hair, they offered reference material, told stories, and lended suggestions and advice, effectively becoming part of the work. This body of artwork is but a reflection of the gravity and intimacy of these exchanges.

THE WORK

This thesis project represents the culmination of my experiments in hair. Through historical and artistic research, I have explored many avenues for understanding and expressing the vibrant materiality of hair more fully. While many iterations remain unresolved, I view them as valuable steps in the process of learning how to interact with hair as a material. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam states that "...under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world." (2). This expansive and humbling thesis project was an exercise in a new form of knowledge production, one that is naively rooted in "more questions and fewer answers." (Halberstam, 10). As a result, this work is not the final project, but merely a beginning.

Fig. 10, Jes Bonin, *Affinities*, Installation view, 2022. Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Michael O'Brien Exhibition Commons.

STOP MOTION:
OBSERVATION VS. INTERVENTION

A gut feeling attracted me to work with hair; I can only describe this feeling as a compulsion. Czech animator Jan Svankmajer's manifesto states: "the objects of my desire seek me out, not I them." (105). As a result of my peculiar inner desire, I started browsing human hair wigs for sale on eBay *(Fig. 11)*. I was drawn to hair's curious and intangible energy, and human hair seemed the most accessible. I purchased a lot of human hair wigs and hairpieces, an "estate find", not certain of how I would use them but interested in the ways a wig can instantly transform your physical identity. Hair and identity are inextricably linked.

Fig. 11. Screenshot of eBay wigs, 2021. *Public Domain.*

A week later, the package of wigs arrived. I observed that they were second hand, with a most distinct foul odor and a used-up rattiness that I can only describe as a personality. The wigs felt strangely alive, like they still possessed the energy of the

person who grew or wore them. Hair, as a relic, has come to represent the “radiant, irreducible core” (Barthes 75), alluding to an absent human body (Holm 140). I felt strongly that in handling this hair, I could sense its energetic properties, not sure of what that meant exactly.

Fisher describes how “intuition holds the capacity to *become* that what it perceives.” (11). Some might refer to this practice as psychometry[9], a form of extrasensory perception wherein a person reads an object by making physical contact with it. In perceiving the energy of these wigs, or as Svankmajer says, “the imaginative power glowing out of them” (106), I intuitively began to animate them, making stop-motion film sketches[10] on my iphone using an app called iMotion. Animation had the potential to capture and express the inherent tendency towards motion that hair already possessed.

Fig. 12. Jes Bonin, Film still, *Critters*, 2021. Stop-motion animation.

[9] The concept of psychometry refers to the idea of measuring the soul of an object. It was originated in 1842 by Joseph Rhodes Buchanan, a physician and professor of physiology, who believed that all things give off an emanation (“Psychometry”)

[10] Stop motion animation is the technique of using photography to portray an image in motion. The motion is broken down into tiny increments and documented by photograph, frame-by-frame. This photographic sequence is then played back on screen to create the illusion of continuous motion. This medium has the potential to give the illusion of an inanimate object coming to life.

There was a distinct divide in my animations. Initially, they involved me manipulating the hair, intervening and acting as a supposed conduit for the hair's agency. I did several iterations that involved moving the hair frame-by-frame *(Fig. 12, Fig. 15)*, which in most instances, gave the wigs an animalistic or creaturely quality reminiscent of television shows such as Star Trek's tribbles *(Fig. 14)* or the Thing from The Addams Family *(Fig. 13)*. This was perhaps too strong an intervention, and I eventually came to the conclusion that while it did in fact make the hair seem alive, it missed the whole point of discovering a vibrant material's "thing-power".

Fig. 13 Film still, the Addams Family. Public Domain.

Fig. 14 Film Still, Star Trek. Public Domain.

Fig. 15. Jes Bonin, Film stills, *the Traveler,* 2021. Stop-motion animation.

In stark contrast, other animations involved passively observing hair with a camera as it interacted with the wind and water. In these animations, the strands wiggle subtly and eerily, expressing the changing dynamic as affected by the elements. These moving images were strangely evocative and eerie, and the hair's vitality became more apparent. When Svankmajer discusses his own approach to

collaborating with objects, he describes an intentional passivity that allows the space for chance occurrences of magic, discovery, or alchemy. Within my animation experiments, I eventually found it important to take a step back and intervene less, allowing the hair more agency. When Albers described her relationship to material, she said that “listening to it, not dominating it makes us truly active, that is: to be active, be passive.” (1982). Easier said than done; it took many iterations and much reflection to arrive at a work that I felt satisfied this requirement. Recognizing that I will always be an active and biased constituent in these collaborations, passivity is not entirely possible. I try to mediate my interactions by approaching this work with a contemplative assessment of my own orientation.

In *Wild Hair*, 2022 *(Fig. 16)*, a canvas surface is covered in collected wigs. Affixed onto a corkboard, the individuality of these wigs becomes obscured into a hairy mass of browns, blondes, grays and auburns. In the first rendition, the wigs are filmed as they are blown by the wind. In the second rendition, the wigs are rained upon. For this work, I felt it important to allow the hair to move by itself, without my intervention. Interacting with the wind and rain, the hair becomes part of an assemblage of natural elements. Both films are converted to short looping GIF animations by capturing still photos from the film footage. For the purpose of my thesis exhibition, these works are displayed on large screens. They have the effect of a mostly still but slightly moving presence. In giving motion and life to inanimate objects, stop motion animation has the ability to embody the supernatural, that of a haunted object. The looping animation speaks to the hair’s materiality, allowing the viewer to notice minute nuances in texture and color.

Fig. 16. Jes Bonin, Film still, *Wild Hair,* 2022. Stop-motion animation.

CYANOTYPES:
ORGANIC ASSEMBLAGE

Fig. 17 Jes Bonin, *Apparitions (detail),* 2022. Toned cyanotype on linen, 11” x 16”.

Fig. 18. Jes Bonin, *Apparitions,* 2022. Toned cyanotype on linen, 47” x 89”.

In the work *Apparitions* 2022 *(Fig. 1, 17 & 18)*, I use the cyanotype printing process to capture the silhouettes of a collection of human hair ponytails and braids on linen panels. This collection has been acquired slowly over time. The hair, which lands on the fabric panel in a unique orientation each instance, obscures the light of the sun to create a single imprint of its presence on the emulsified fabric. I am interested in facilitating this interaction between the sun, fabric, and photosensitive emulsion as a way of investigating the vibrancy of hair. I liken this process to the fortune telling practice of reading tea leaves, in that each fallen piece of hair has a story to tell. The reading is left open, to be interpreted by the viewer. In referencing divination, I contextualize this project with the work of other intuitive and spiritualist artists.

Japanese-Canadian performance and installation artist Cindy Mochizuki often uses tasseography and other forms of divination in her practice. Interviewed about her process, she discusses "how we 'read' an image versus just looking with our eyes." She goes on to describe how the objects she makes are "not meant to lie dormant" and "could be used for some other form of telling." (Mochizuki 1). I am interested in what these imprints of hair might have to say. Simultaneously, what does our reading of the work tell us about ourselves? Like a Rorschach test[11], could our individual interpretations of these hair imprints reveal some hidden aspect of the subconscious? Additionally, what do our readings of this work expose about the inner workings of our individual social, political, and cultural conditioning? We have much to learn in examining our own response.

Another artist I draw from is Susan Hiller. In the piece *From India to the Planet Mars* 1997-2004 *(Fig. 19)*, Hiller solicited automatic writings and drawings from a diverse collection of acquaintances. Automatic writing, also known as psychography or spirit writing, is done without conscious thought, believed to be a method for communicating with spirits, the subconscious mind, and a way to channel psychic or intuitive abilities. Hiller transformed the collected writings into large black and white lightboxes, which makes them feel like x-rays of the supernatural. In my work, *Ghosts, Remnants*, the stark whiteness of the hair's imprint on the black background is evocative of something once there but now gone, that of a ghost or haunting.

Fig. 19. Susan Hiller, *From India to the Planet Mars*, 1997-2004. Used by permission of the estate of Susan Hiller.

[11] The Rorschach test is a projective psychological test in which subjects' perceptions of inkblots are recorded and then analyzed using psychological interpretation, complex algorithms, or both.

As biological detritus, hair inevitably harkens to feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva's concepts of the abject[12]. Lively yet technically dead, human hair without the context of the body from which it came is simultaneously grotesque and mysteriously beautiful. Throughout history, human hair has been used as an object of mourning and sentimentality relating to its human host. Visually, these isolated and dismembered ponytails have a potentially unsettling effect, possibly alluding to death. Hair outlasts the natural entropy of the deceased body because of the slow decomposition rate of keratin, which is naturally resistant to proteolysis[13]; the oldest hair on archaeological record was found in fossilized hyena dung in South Africa, linked to humans living 195,000 to 257,000 years ago. This trace left behind can offer much information about the human it was once attached to.

The silhouette as an aesthetic device precedes photography, and was historically used as a way to record the specificity of a person's appearance. With regard to hair, the silhouette describes hair's texture and length. Whether it be smooth, straight, curly, long, short, kinky or frizzy, hair has become a marker of mononormative thinking, a landing place for judgements about class, race, gender, age, attractiveness, physical and mental health. Though this work preserves the anonymity of each donor, the first impressions and assumptions we make might serve as an important indicator of personal bias. Comparing my cyanotypes to those of artist Rebecca Bair's *(Fig. 20)* make these visual disparities truly apparent. The hair she uses for cyanotype is distinctly kinky. The wiggly strands are full of energetic movement, but I do not see myself in them. Concurrently, I cannot fully comprehend her experience with hair as a Black woman. While the prints exude a joyful electricity, the work cannot be separated from the tension of the history of oppression based on race. "The resemblance of cyanotype to indigo–the original slave crop, coveted for its "royal blue" dye–is not lost on Bair. Her cyanotype exposures celebrate black joy and autonomy. Their invocation of air and sky is the very image of uplift." (Ramsey).

[12] Abject, as described in the essay "Powers of Horror" by Julia Kristeva, refers to human response to a threatened breakdown in meaning of the symbolic order and a reestablishment of our primal repression. The simultaneous desire & horror of abjection is due to the loss of the distinction between subject and object, or between the self and the other, especially with regard to material products of the human body and the way they might confront us with our own mortality. Human hair has symbolically and throughout history been considered a sexual signifier. When detached from the human body, it alludes to castration, which can evoke feelings of intense dis-ease.

[13] the breakdown of proteins or peptides into amino acids by the action of enzymes

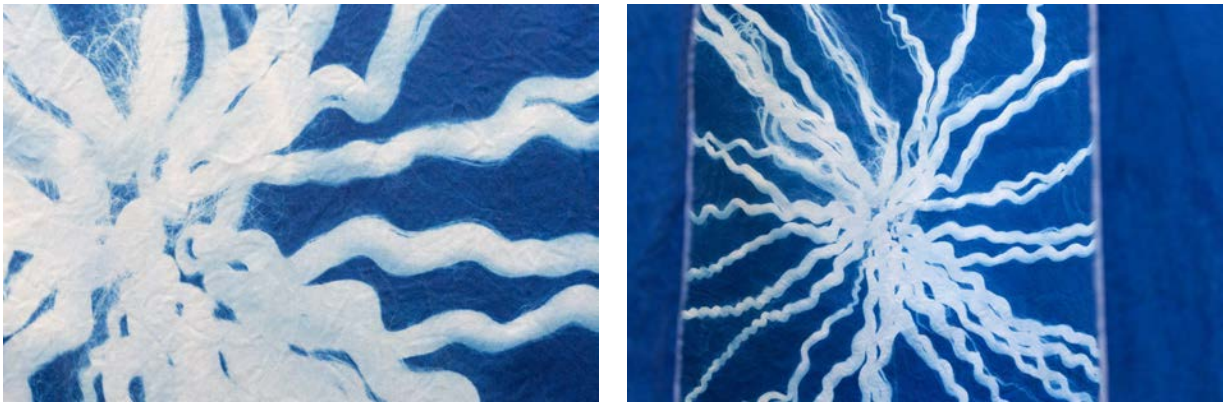

Fig. 20. Rebecca Bair, *Untitled Cyanotype (X-pression)*, 2022. Cyanotype hair trace on cotton, dimensions variable. Used by permission of the artist.

In the essay “Hair & Loathing”, artist and educator Kristina Lee Podesva describes the racialized hierarchy of hair attributes:

> “There is, in fact, a fundamentally aesthetic aspect to the racism and “race science” we inherited from the European Enlightenment according to Kobena Mercer in “Black Hair/Style Politics” (1987). In discourses of “scientific racism”, “the very observable, discernible, biological “traits” of skin color and hair texture” (along with details concerning theof groups) have been mis-taken ~~(over and over again)~~ by Enlightenment thinkers as “signs to be identified, named, classified and ordered into a hierarchy of human worth,” with black/“Negro” aspects pushed to the bottom and white/“Caucasian” attributes forced up to the top, such that blackness constituted “the absolute negation or annulment of ‘beauty’...”

These factors influence the myriad ways we “read” hair. In this work, I have found moments to reflect upon my own personal biases, and hope to encourage the viewer to do the same. I approach my work with an investment in developing a decolonial approach. Through extensive historical research and contextualization, I am working to unravel and unlearn my own personal conditioning and ingrained prejudices, hoping to further dismantle harmful imperial, colonial, and racist ideologies. For instance, In an essay written for Bair’s exhibit at BAF, Elliott Ramsay describes how “Evolutionary biologists have speculated that the curl of Afro-textured hair gave early humankind an advantage. Its buoyancy kept the head cool; its structure prevented the harsh UV of equatorial light from transiting right to the scalp, thus protecting the human brain and allowing its development.” To me,

this notion further enforces the idea that Racism is a social construct, and perceptions about Caucasian superiority are completely false.

What makes Bair's and my work similar is our subject matter, hair, and our medium, cyanotype. We are both drawn to express the inherent glow of an object, which cyanotype is uniquely able to capture. On this topic, I am inspired by the photogram work *may they or may they seize (*2019) by Erika Defrietas *(Fig. 21)*. In an interview with Gallery TPW, Defreitas says she will "sense an object glowing", which she describes as its aura (Fisher 2019,20). She then interacts with the time and light sensitive photo emulsion process in the darkroom to attempt to document and capture the aura of said object. The stark white on black imagery of Defreitas's photograms is reminiscent of the blurred, in-motion photographs of American dancer Louie Fuller, which were often described as visions of apparitions or materializations of ghosts *(Fig. 22)*. The Spiritualists often used photography to try and capture images of ghosts and spirits. Through this technology, they were attempting to bridge the gap between life and death, the corporeal and the spirit, empirical fact and intuitive knowledge.

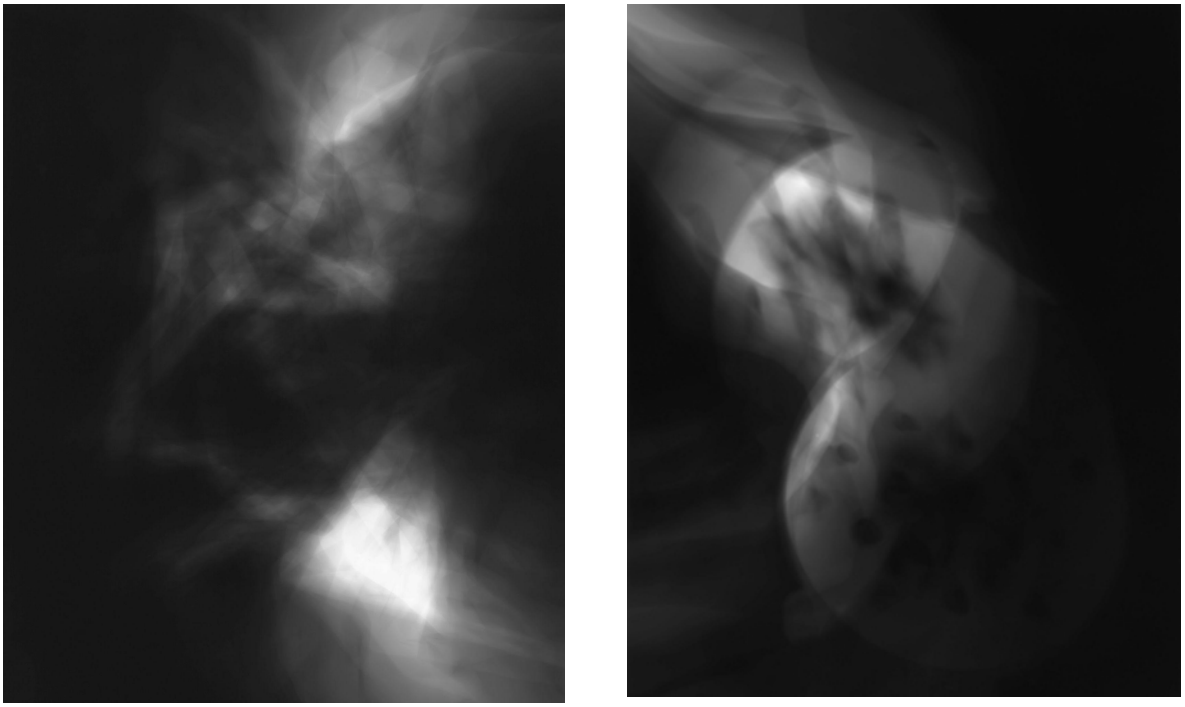

Fig. 21. Erika Defreitas, *may they or may they seize*, 2019. Photogram.
Used by permission of the artist.

Fig. 22. Loie Fuller, *Veil Dance*, 1906.
Public Domain.

Cyanotype is a form of photography and image reproduction invented in 1842. It was initially discovered as a technique to reproduce blueprint drawings, but soon thereafter was adapted for artistic use. I was drawn to cyanotype printing because the process offers a hands-on type of alchemy wherein one can collaborate with the sun. A mysterious transformation occurs and an image appears suddenly on fabric. Bleaching the print erases the image, which I then tone in black tea to make it reappear. This simple science, performed easily at home, feels like magic. I like the accessibility and approachability of this visual conjuring; I find value in the notion that it can be performed by nearly anyone.

Apparitions is printed on linen, which is one of the oldest known woven fabrics in archaeological record, dating back 36,000 years. Using fabric to cover one's body is uniquely human. The essay "Making as Knowing" by Gerard Lehmann states that "the weaving of fabrics can be said to lie at the origin of culture...as it guarantees the production of objects that provide cover for the skin, shelter for the body, and distinction within social discourses" (58). I was taught to sew by my matriarchs, and have been sewing my own clothing since I was eight years old, actively participating in adorning my own body and the bodies of others. These women

taught me the complex mechanics of clothing construction; learning the intricacies of how to use patterns and construct articles of clothing as a youngster taught me patience and attention to detail. I began this journey with doll clothing made from scraps of satin, moved to matching culotte sets, prom dresses, my own wedding dress, and eventually custom couture clothing for clients. As a result, working in textiles is an integral aspect of my artistic expression and one of the ways I orient my body in space. The marriage of textiles and cyanotype printing is a way to merge disciplines in further pursuit of my interest in the supernatural.

Displaying this work in a grid is a nod to the craft of quilting, where small fragments of fabric are sewn together to make a blanket. In my research into the history of American quilts (Hanson), I have found that the quilted blanket is an aspect of women's work that epitomizes resourcefulness, thrift, nurturance, comfort, creative self expression, and sentimentality. I see these values echoed in my matriarchal upbringing as a positive expression of femininity. In learning how to utilize scraps handed down to me by my matriarchs, I found potential in the discards. Working with my hands and giving birth to beautiful objects became not only an expression feminine self-empowerment, but also evidence of our creative community and knowledge-sharing traditions. My cyanotypes, like a quilt, are meant to be read as one piece, representative of a population. In leaving the pieces unattached from one another, I also hope to emphasize each panel's individuality and autonomy within the whole.

CHANDELIERS:
INTERDISCIPLINARY EMERGENCE

Fig 23. Jes Bonin, *Soft Armor: Color Palette,* 2021. Assemblage, 14” x 25”.

Fig. 24. *Screenshot of hair swatches from eBay,* 2021. *Public Domain*.

One of the items I became fixated upon in searching eBay were vintage hair dye swatches made from human hair *(Fig. 24)*. An interesting aesthetic object, they also operate with a distinct utilitarian functionality. Each swatch of hair is perfectly straight and tightly bound in a metal clasp, creating an inorganic and manufactured-feeling uniformity. This uniformity is not neutral; it homogenizes and thereby racializes the hair. The clasps hang from a large loop, jangling like a janitor's keyring. The hues of dye, tagged and cataloged by name and number, are the visual representation of choice and agency, a gateway to manipulating physicality through the changing of hair color. Somehow they also feel weirdly mechanized and sterile, with every hue of hair reduced to a number.

As the history of ornamental tassels dictates, these tassels too seemed destined to hang. In my craft store meanderings I stumbled upon a DIY hanging armature and my first hair chandelier was born *(Fig. 23)*. Each tassel slipped on the premade hooks with ease; it felt like artistic kismet. I hung the chandelier in my bedroom and was immediately taken by the way it moved. Suspended by monofilament, the cylindrical tiered hair fixture seemed to catch even the lightest unnoticeable drafts and began to spin. Other times it was perfectly still. I experimented with focusing my attention to see if I could use my energy to turn it. Other times I wondered if my resident ghost[14] found it entertaining to play with when there seemed to be no wind and it whirled easily on its own.

This chandelier in relationship with the wind led me to think about the concept of congregate bodies that Bennett discusses. I had created an assemblage, defined as "a material cluster of charged parts that have indeed affiliated, remaining in sufficient proximity and coordination to produce distinctive effects" (24). In my assemblage, the hair interacts with the metal armatures which then interact with the wind and tensile strength of the fishing line. The result is a fixture which spins independently and unpredictably. Working together, the thing-power of each object is enhanced. I was interested in pursuing this idea further and beyond obvious materiality.

According to Deborah Lutz in the article "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture", "Spiritualists believed not only that the worlds of the living and the dead, the absent and the present, were permeable, but that the dead hovered close, and the lines of communication might be kept open." (132). She also describes the concept of sympathetic magic, wherein a lock of hair can potentially bring the presence of the whole person. Taking all these ideas into account begs the question: can a hair chandelier be a magical talisman or otherworldly communicator?

Victorian mourning jewelry has been of particular interest to me because it integrates concepts of hair, death, mourning, and the afterlife. In mimicking these techniques, I hoped to access the more elusive and ethereal aspects of this ritualistic practice. Seeking to learn more, I found a community of hair work enthusiasts on Instagram who share information, history, and imagery, which is where I learned of artist Nafis White *(Fig. 25-27)*. According to her artist statement,

[14] It is my belief that ghosts can exist as residual energy of humans after they are deceased. I have had the experience of my house being haunted; the hair chandelier is just one of several things at my home that have been visibly and drastically moved by mysterious and unseen forces.

White “employs her research on the intricate customs of Victorian Hair Weaving and mourning traditions and appropriates them using Black hair, beauty products, and hairstyling techniques where they were never imagined to take up space and esteem.” It was inspiring to see how the same influence of Victorian hair work could result in such drastically different visual expressions. White’s large sculptures are colorful, cacophonous, intricately patterned and layered assemblages of extensions. Compared to the tightly wound and bound Victorian hair weavings, her sculptures are exciting, energetic visual celebrations that seemed to defy containment.

Fig. 25. Nafis White, *Strand (detail),* 2019.
Used by permission of Cade Tompkins Projects.

Fig. 26. Nafis White, *Strand,* 2019.
Fig. 27. Nafis White in studio, 2019.

My first chandelier harkened to upholstery tassels, lampshades, and other types of domestic adornment. I began to think about formal interiors and the Victorian ethos around home embellishments. In *American Quilts in the Modern Age*, Marin F. Hanson describes how during the Aesthetic movement of the Victorian era (1860-1870’s) it was the distinct responsibility of women to decorate the home sphere and domestic surroundings. Through fancywork, or the making of decorative objects, middle and upper class women could ensure the moral

edification of the home. The fancywork of the Aesthetic era was also an active resistance against the harmful effects of industrialization. (Hanson, 2). This strategy of clinging to customs and values seemed to correlate with the profound sentimentality of Victorians as exhibited in their mourning jewelry and hair wreaths *(Fig. 28)*, wherein “personal relic collecting is the wish that the relic might mark the continued existence of the body to which it once belonged” and the enduring Romantic “cultivation of wrought-up and drawn-out feelings” (Lutz 130). The ornate maximalism of Victorians was representative of “a longing for the types of physical or spiritual experience embodied in utopian futures and imagined pasts.” (Hanson, 2). In this way, handicraft became an embodied form of activism, protection and nurturance for women with little to no political or economic power. I too find profound serenity, potential and strength in pursuit of craft handiwork.

Fig. 28. Screenshot of Victorian hair wreath from eBay, maker unknown. *Public Domain.*

Fig. 29. screenshot of beaded bonsai tree from eBay, maker unknown. *Public Domain.*

I imagined all of the different ways that hair could adorn a metal armature that mimicked upholstery, lampshades, and curtains. I couldn't help but be influenced by the ornate formality of my great Aunt June's house; lavish in its draperies and brocades, the buttoned up presentation always represented feminine ideals of security, stability, nurturance and piousness. Formally, I wanted to reference the unofficial talismans of a bygone era, when women were charged with the domestic sphere and spent hours upon hours immersed in handicraft. Wire work came to mind as I remembered the painstakingly beaded bonsai trees of the 50's, now relegated to thrift store kitsch *(Fig. 29)*. These trees utilized some of the same techniques as Victorian hair wreaths over 70 years later, showing how craft techniques endure, adapt, and are modified over time. Armed with visions of ropes, cordage, tassels and fringe, scalloping, ruching, weaves, loops and bows, I set about making more chandeliers. Using floral wire found at the local craft store, I twisted up armatures that I envisioned in my mind's eye. I spun hair into yarn *(Fig. 31)*, crafted my own tassels (Fig. 30), and accessed YouTube to learn Victorian hair weaving techniques.

Fig. 30. Jes Bonin, *Tassel*, 2022.

Fig. 31. Jes Bonin, drop spindled hair yarn, 2022.

In the combination and hybridization of handiwork techniques, I harken to a multitude of crafts I have learned throughout my matriarchal upbringing: floral arranging, jewelry making, sewing, knitting, crochet, macrame, yarn spinning, basketry, and beading, to name a few. These techniques have become a language and way of visually communicating. They are integral to how I think with my hands, inherent to my process of making. I move fluidly between them without much conscious thought. These chandeliers have become a capacious receptacle for the intuitive meandering that encapsulates much of my artistic process.

Fig. 32. Jes Bonin, *Spirit Catcher*, 2022. Human hair and steel wire, 24” x 10” x 10”.

Fig. 33. Jes Bonin, *Spirit Catcher*, 2022. Human hair and steel wire, 20” x 10”x 10”.

Fig. 34. Jes Bonin, *Spirit Catcher*, 2022. Human hair and steel wire, 18”x 10” x 10”.

Fig. 35. Jes Bonin, *Affinities (installation view),* 2022.
Emily Carr University of Art+Design, Michael O'Brien Exhibition Commons.

Surprise Endings

Hanging this body of work at Emily Carr came with a host of discoveries that were dependent on variables outside of my control. These variables resulted in some artistic kismet that will surely impact the work moving forward. I almost wish I could write this paper again, knowing what I know now.

1. Due to ongoing technical difficulties, I printed all the cyanotypes at the very last minute the week before hanging the show. Despite my research and material tests, much was left to chance, and I didn't anticipate the anthropomorphic qualities of these ponytail prints! En masse, they looked like dancing lady ghosts with full flowing skirts. I was overjoyed by the result but could have never planned for this effect. It was a delightful happenstance, especially considering my investment in matriarchal wisdom.

2. I had never been on campus before due to Covid border closures and was unfamiliar with the gallery spaces. When spots were assigned, I got shuffled around and eventually ended up relegated to the atrium. Upon my arrival, I made a rough layout, working intuitively. I hung my thin linen rectangles in a grid, fastened by wire nails so they floated about an inch off the wall. Slight breezes were created by adjacent traffic plus the opening and closing of a nearby door. These gusts moved the linen delicately in a constant slight fluttering. Without my intervention, the linens were animated! The work seemed more alive than I could have ever planned for or anticipated!

3. This location necessitated hanging my chandeliers against a wall, which wasn't the original plan. While I was away, I asked a fellow student to assist with lighting the work, which created dynamic shadows! Intricately layered, the shadows turned slowly with the chandeliers. They seemed like animated ghosts, hauntings, ethereal traces of matter! This chance discovery suddenly became a hugely important part of the piece.

In addition to these discoveries, I have had time to reflect on and consider more deeply what it means to work with others in a participation-based practice. I am seeing ways I can engage with people more personally and deeply, considering the ways intimacy, respect and consent factor into working with hair and bodies. I am also interested in ways to be more inclusive in the future, so my work can fairly represent a broader population than just my peer group in my small town.

Conclusion

Getting acquainted with hair has been a journey into awareness. Through historical research, I have untangled much of my own troubled past with hair and gender, examining my orientation in the pursuit of situated knowledge. I have a greater understanding of hair's role in shaping and reinforcing racist ideologies, and can use this information in working towards a decolonial future. Integrating intuitive practices into my artistic research, I took new risks and followed hunches down every trail. I learned a multitude of methods and techniques, with the greatest lesson being that failure is a necessary and welcome part of artistic growth. I was taught to contextualize my work in conversation with others, which lends credibility to pursuits like spiritualism and craft that have often been marginalized in academia. I have been challenged to ruminate on and articulate every nook and cranny of my praxis, which has been one of the most intimidating and rewarding pursuits of my life. I have been tested and pushed, and have learned persistence, humility, and perseverance in the process.

Ultimately, I realize that sometimes the production of knowledge requires dismantling everything you thought you knew and took for granted. Unlearning and unknowing has been a terrifying and vulnerable space, but necessary to make room for new ideas. This process of becoming, it broke me down, stretched me thin, and made me feel unstable. Upon this broken ground, a new foundation was laid. I am eager to build upon this new beginning with an emergent practice containing endless possibilities and potential.

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