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Thinking Through *Crafting*
An Examination of Material Exploration as a Way of Inquiry

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Abstract

This thesis research project focuses on the transformative potential of repurposed fibre materials, exploring the role of craft as a medium for artistic inquiry and expression. Through a series of experimental paper sculptures and textile installations, this research investigates the potential of craft to navigate, engage and process the existential unease provoked by the problematic state of the current world. By engaging with the tactile and sensuous qualities of materials, the project seeks to establish a dialogue between human and non-human entities, highlighting craft's capacity to foster a deeper appreciation and connection with the world we inhabit. This thesis project proposes *crafting* as a vital methodological approach for exploring and expressing the complexities in many of the current crises, advocating for a reimagined engagement with our material surroundings.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my loving parents, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been the cornerstone of my educational journey. It is through their sacrifice that I have been afforded the opportunity to pursue my studies and conduct this research. Their belief in me has been a constant source of motivation and strength.

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Glossary

abaca: A banana plant usually raised in the Philippines; it is also known as Manila hemp.

bast fibre: The inner bark fibres from woody plants (shrubs and trees). When this inner bark is separated from the outer bark, it can be used in papermaking, thread spinning and other forms of textile.

beater: Commonly refers to the paper Hollander beater (see Hollander beater). It is a piece of equipment used in the fibre preparation stage for papermaking, it shreds and plasticizes fibre material by beating it with rotation of bars of flat-end blades in the machine.

beating: The mechanical or manual treatment of fibre materials to soften it. This stage prepares the fibre for hydrogen bonding, which occurs in the papermaking and drying process. The duration of beating time also affects the finished result of the paper in various ways.

bobbin: A spool that holds the weft (see weft) threads on a boat shuttle (see shuttle).

Box Charkha: A portable version of the traditional spinning wheel from India.

cooking: One of the steps in raw fibre preparation. Traditionally, wood ash lye is used as a type of alkali to remove non-cellulose materials. In modern papermaking, soda ash (sodium carbonate) is commonly used for cooking the raw fibre.

cotton linters: The short fibres that cling on cotton seed after longer staple fibres have been removed during the ginning process. This fibre material is also a by-product of the cotton-ginning process.

cotton rag: Any materials made originally from the long staple fibre on the cotton seed. This can also be recycled rags or fabrics that are made with cotton.

couch: Comes from the French word *coucher* – to lay [something] down. It refers to removing or transferring the newly formed sheet from the mould onto a wet felt.

cramming and spacing: Refers to a technique in weaving to alter the density and texture of the fabric by adjusting the distribution of warp (see warp) thread.

deckle: An open wooden frame that fits over the mould (see mould); the frame defines the edge of the sheet during the formation process.

felt: A piece of interleaving wool fabric, which the newly formed paper is couched.

gampi: A member of the Thymelaeace family. It is a low-growth shrub in Southeast Asia. Gampi fibres are thin, strong, and lustrous, making them suitable for producing paper with wonderful translucency.

Hollander beater: A machine developed in the late 17th century in the Netherlands. It replaced the stamping mill in papermaking factories.

kami-ito: It is a Japanese term for paper thread, which *kami* refers to paper, and *ito* refers to thread. It commonly refers to a type of paper thread made with *washi* paper and used for weaving *shifu* (see *shifu*).

kozo: A member of the mulberry family, it is a fibre commonly used in Eastern papermaking. The fibre features a long, strong and sinewy quality.

kyougi sheet: A type of Japanese paper made from wood shavings.

mould: Pairing with a deckle, it is used in the formation of paper. It contains a mesh screen surface to allow water to drain through it.

plain weave: Also known as tabby weave. It is the simplest weaving

structure in textiles. It involves an alternation of over-and-under pattern of warp and weft threads.

pulp: A mass with soft and mushy quality. It is derived from the processed wood, plant fibres, or rags.

shaft: This also refers to harness; it is the frame in which heddles are suspended. A two/four shaft loom is a type of weaving loom that contains two or four shafts that can be raised and lowered in various combinations to create different weaving patterns.

shifu: A Japanese term for a cloth woven with *kami-ito* (paper thread) either in the warp or weft or in both.

shuttle: A tool used to carry the bobbin, which contains the weft threads back and forth between the warp threads on a loom.

spinning: A textile manufacturing process of transforming fibres into yarn or thread.

warp: Threads that run vertically along the length of the loom, crossed by the weft threads.

weft: Threads that run horizontally across the loom and interlace with the warp thread to create a woven structure.

The Feeling of Unease

As an artist, my creative research emerges in a time of environmental collapse, where the reality of climate change poses a significant threat to human and non-human existence. My research journey is born out of a pressing need to find navigation through a time of crisis. This thesis research informs a series of experimental paper sculptures and textile installations with woven objects fabricated with handmade paper. The exploration is driven by a desire to shed light in the darkest times, proposing that crafting by hand can serve as a guiding force. Within my process, I engage in dialogue with curator-scholar Maria Elena Buszek's edited anthology, *Extra/Ordinary Craft and Contemporary Art*, which explores "the sensuous, tactile 'information' of craft media speaks...of a direct connection to humanity that is perhaps endangered, or at the very least being rapidly reconfigured in our technologically saturated twenty-first-century lives."¹ In this context, my thesis research is an inquiry into 1) new perspectives on the role of handmade, 2) the materiality of repurposed fibre material and 3) how to make space for myself and others to understand our relationship with the world, thus be able to engage and negotiate the unresolved feelings we have of the environmental crisis.

Over the past five years, I have witnessed a rapid, unusual transformation in human history. The theoretical discussions about global warming I once encountered in a science book have now become irrefutable facts. The impact of this sudden but not-too-sudden collapse has led to numerous natural disasters, subjecting humans and non-humans to the harsh realities of suffering from life and death, diseases, and the struggle for shelter. Daily, I am visited with news of the latest disasters, analytical data, and hypotheses by professionals trending through social media and movies depicting the apocalypse. The information I involuntarily encounter daily is overwhelming, plunging me into an abyss that is not whimsical

¹ Maria Elena Buszek, "Introduction," essay, in *Extra/Ordinary Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2011), 1-19.

like Alice in Wonderland's rabbit hole but a montage illustrating the world's impending doom.

In "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change," Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht notes that "[new] and powerful technologies have enabled transitions to occur to the social and natural environment at a speed that makes adaption difficult if not possible."² I find myself, like many others, experiencing this distress, a challenge in navigating through this "psychological illness" because we are in an information-saturated world. The discomfort from this experience undermines my sense of belonging to place, the feeling of loss is enlarged by the disconnection and powerlessness felt in response to the rapid changes in my living environment. I associate these overwhelmed, uneased feelings with the term solastalgia. Coined by Albrecht, this term describes the distress caused by environmental change impacting one's sense of place and home³. For me, the feeling of solastalgia doesn't start from nowhere, nor being nostalgic. It is from the accumulation of witnessing the drastic transformation of the land through personal experience and online information feeds.

On July 22, 2021, I received a message from my cousin back home in China. It was a message of two pictures and a short sentence saying they were safe. I was confused, shocked and worried because I could not recognize the place in the photos or identify what happened. Not until later that day I came across online social media saying that there was a multi-day storm happening in my father's hometown, Zhengzhou, and it caused various flash floods in town. My cousin told me the place in the photos was the tea garden at the foothills of their farm, a place where I grew up playing with and go visit every time when I travel back to China. Looking at the documentation of what happened to the land I once lived, a strange feeling welled up in my body, and it became a sense of soreness or aching that

² Glenn Albrecht et al., "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change," *Australasian Psychiatry* 15, no. 1_suppl (February 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10398560701701288>, 45.

³ Ibid.

slowly crawled up to my throat. For a very long time, I could not adjust myself to acknowledge and digest what had happened, and it became a sense of void that I didn't know how to address and engage with whenever this topic was brought up.

As I come across more and more news about the natural disasters that happen to the land globally, I recognize the uneasiness from witnessing the climate crisis is going to be a mental issue if I leave it as an avoidance. Acknowledging that the transformation of our living environment is going to be endless, and we don't have the power to stop any undesirable changes, I then consider how I can live with it. I then question how we can approach and process the distress from the rapid transformation of our living environment. How do we re-establish a caring relationship with a place that is undergoing various transformations? More extensively, how does this care become a reimaged way for us to approach and engage with the world that we live in? Lingering around these questions, my thesis becomes an exploration of a craft-oriented process that navigates my approach to the sense of unease. By examining diverse ways of making and engaging with material surroundings, this research strives to find an alternative for me and others to slow down, recollect and process amidst to the ongoing crisis.



Fig. 1. Xiaoyin Luo, *Thinking Paper: Metamorphosing* (installation view), 2023. Handmade paper objects with cotton, abaca, black cotton barks, Japanese indigo stalks, linen thread, handmade reed grass *kami-ito*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Positionality

Growing up in a typical Chinese middle-class family, I am the first generation with a keen interest in pursuing a creative career. Since childhood, I have always received praise from art teachers for my exceptional dexterity with craft, and wanted to contribute my creative ability to "change or save the world."⁴ While pursuing my artistic dream, I discovered a profound connection to various craft practices such as knitting, embroidery, crochet, ceramics and paper cutting. Engaging in these activities demanded not only the involvement of my body and mind, but also a deep connection with the materials at hand.

Transitioning from considering these crafts as mere hobbies, I began questioning the messages I wanted to convey and the stories these mediums could tell. Along the way, I realized that I have gradually lost myself in why I do what I do. It is not about the lack of ability to express myself; instead, it is about the lack of understanding and knowledge of the world and my relationship to it. With support from my family, I decided to study abroad and landed in Canada in 2016.

Being away from China and immersed in an entirely different cultural context has deepened my longing for home. This feeling goes beyond merely lacking a sense of belonging – culturally and socially – in this foreign land; it encompasses a disconnect and the loss of attachment to the physical place itself. Over the years, this feeling of homesickness has shifted and evolved with a concept environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht describes as *solastalgia* – “the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory.”⁵ Unlike homesickness (思乡/乡愁), which carries a hopeful undertone of eventual return to the homeland, *solastalgia* (乡痛) brings the realization that the home I yearn for may have irrevocably changed due to the

⁴ There is a national saying within the Chinese society that children are the future of the nation, they are metaphorically described as the “floral” and “backbone” of the motherland. They have the responsibility to contribute to the future development of the nation or the world.

⁵ Albrecht et al., “Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change,” 45.

passage of time and environmental shifts.⁶ This sense of loss is particularly sorrowful in the state of the current world in which we are constantly bombarded with messages of troubles. The rapid transformations and the constant feed of information are hard to digest and react to, and it deepens my sense of alienation amidst a time of crisis.

Studying printmaking in my BFA at OCAD University not only provided me an opportunity to explore paper as a medium and learn about the craft of papermaking, but it also furnished a creative refuge from distressed feelings, offering a way to engage with the world differently. My introduction to papermaking in a textile exploration class opened a new avenue for artistic expression that resonates deeply with my Chinese heritage⁷. Choosing handmade paper as my medium not only became a unique way to approach the uneasiness I felt towards the loss of land back home; it also reflected on my cultural identity from the vantage point of a foreign land with its distinct language, culture and customs. This process has fostered a special bond and an intimate feeling with paper as a material I am in partnership with, elevating it above others in my artistic practice. With this thesis research, I aim to explore how the act of crafting—particularly working with different natural fibre materials in papermaking—can serve as a way for approaching and transforming the sense of solastalgia into a form of engagement and care to this planet, which I consider home.

⁶ In Chinese, SīXiāng (思乡) is defined as homesickness; Xiāngchǒu (乡愁) as nostalgia; and Xiāngtòng (乡痛) as solastalgia. Among these three words, they all share the character of 乡, which refers to home. The slight difference in the characters' use of these words indicates the transformation of my longing for home. It started with uneasiness because of my leave from home; then, it evolved into a yearning for return. And finally, I realized the home that I desperately longed to return to was no longer there because of the environmental changes caused by the climate crisis.

⁷ Paper as a material, one of the Four Great Inventions from ancient China, holds significant cultural importance in Chinese history. Its origin traces back to the Western Han Dynasty, with substantial advancements during the Eastern Han Dynasty by Cai Lun, an imperial court official. Cai Lun refined the papermaking process by incorporating accessible plant fibre materials such as tree bark, hemp, rags, and old fishing nets, significantly enhancing paper quality. Cai Lun's improvements have profoundly influenced the global paper industry and the development of human civilization.

In the papermaking process, I recognize that different plant fibres possess their own languages. My role is to learn how these materials communicate, understand, and facilitate their active participation in the creative process. This approach not only allows me to explore the materiality of plant fibres but also to engage with the world in a manner that bridges my sense of alienation. Working with craft and the handmade has brought me back to my Chinese culture and philosophical roots. I grew up with cartoons and folklore that embed the idea of 天人合一 (oneness of nature and humans)⁸ and 万物皆有灵 (everything has a spirit/soul, or what's typically recognized in English as animism). I remember one of the books I read as a kid – *山海经* (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*). This book discusses Chinese mythology; it not only delves into supernatural beings in Chinese folklore but also describes each living entity in different geographic regions that are intricately and spiritually intertwined with their surroundings. Similar to how mushrooms communicate through mycelium, these living entities collaborate and support each other, forming a cohesive system of living⁹.

As I incorporate these philosophical influences into my work, my thesis serves as a response to the current world. By crafting the narrative of care through

⁸ This is a Chinese philosophical theory that man is an integral part of nature. Combining the term analyzation from Confucianism and Taoism, 天 refers to sky, heaven, the universe and nature; 人 refers to humans (my understanding is it not only relates to humans, but it also includes the non-human); 合一 refers to unity, oneness or wholeness. It refers to the harmony and correspondence between the universe, nature and living bodies.

⁹ In the mythological book *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, there exists a prevalent belief in the animistic notion that every entity possesses a spirit. This ancient text depicts mountains as abodes of spirits, fostering a culture/practice of mountain god worship among ancient peoples. These mountains within the Chinese landscape were rich in resources and considered treasure troves by our ancestors in need of daily necessities. Yet, the limitation of technological capabilities restricted our ancestors from fully understanding these landscapes, leaving much unknown and fueling fears of the unseen. These mountains, embodying the unknown, were believed to be the dwelling places of immortals and the setting of many legends, such as those of Kunlun Mountain and Mount Buzhou.

The sense of reverence and fear towards these unknowns characterized our ancestors' attitude towards mountains and their spirits. They express gratitude for the resources obtained. When they encounter dangers like attacks from wild animals or poisoning from plants or gases, they attribute these adversities to mountain spirits, an unwelcome warning, or punishments from the mountain gods. As our ancestors believe in the principle that "everything has a spirit," they consider everything on the mountain, living or non-living, as an embodiment of these divine entities. By attempting to communicate and show gratitude towards these spirits, our ancestors hope to gain their protection, reflecting a deep spiritual relationship with the natural world rooted in respect, fear, and the desire to coexist harmoniously.

papermaking, *kami-ito* (paper thread) making, and weaving, this research not only provides a way to navigate and react to the unresolved feelings. It also offers a fresh perspective on understanding our relationship with the world and how we might interact with it.

Crafting Antidote



Fig. 2. Xiaoyin Luo, *Experiential Mapping*, 2023. Woven textiles with cotton thread, handmade washi *kami-ito*, reed grass *kami-ito*, black cotton barks, hand-spun linen thread, Japanese indigo paper strips. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3. Xiaoyin Luo, *Nidification* (2nd version), 2023. Cotton thread, linen thread, handmade reed grass *kami-ito*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Craft is not merely a medium searching for potential in creative practices; it is also an intimate agency allowing exploration of my interconnectedness with the environment. Influenced deeply by the concept of animism in Chinese culture, which imbues natural objects and phenomena with spiritual essence, I perceive physically engaging with material in craft practices as an awakening process. This belief is encapsulated in the ancestral teaching “万物皆有灵，草木皆有心”¹⁰ (all things on earth possess a spirit, and every grass and tree has a heart.) This animistic worldview affects how I perceive materials in my craft and life; I see them as entities with their own life force, whether animate or inanimate.

I find this perspective resonates with American theorist Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, where she argues against the notion of inert matter. She suggests that the “vitality of (nonhuman) bodies...edible, commodities, storms, metals...not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”¹¹ Drawing alignment with Bennett’s perception of the active role of material, I consider the practice of craft as an approach to engage with the entanglements of matter and life. Considering materials as living entities in my practice allows me to acknowledge and respect their material properties and capacities to inspire, resist and change the way I think. The slow and intricate process of papermaking and weaving enables me to establish an intimate partnership with materials and reflect on their active participation in the world.

¹⁰ This is a Chinese philosophical teaching that is passed down through oral history. The concept of animism appears in a lot of Chinese philosophical and Buddhist teachings such as Zhuangzi (庄子), Taipinglun (太平论), and Fojing (佛经). However, this concept of animism is not directly referenced in all these books; instead, it emerges through a shared worldview where the natural environment and its constituents are respected and revered as living beings with whom humans can interact, communicate, and form relationships. I also see this parallel to British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor’s argument, in which he defined animism as the belief in spiritual beings and considered it as a fundamental building block in the development of religion. For more on Tylor’s perspective on animism, please refer to his book *Primitive Culture* or visit <https://www.britannica.com/topic/animism>.

¹¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

Collaborating with material agencies in my practice also provides a way to understand the dynamic interactions between myself and my living environment.

With a focus on the transformative potential of handmade paper, this thesis examines the role that craft – more explicitly, the value of handmade – has played in a time of crisis. In the state of the current world, we are constantly bombarded with messages of environmental destruction, war, political division, racism and many other issues. This thesis research focuses not so much on the resolution of these many conflicts but rather on an approach to grappling with the anxiety and distress these existential crises leave us. By investigating the significance of repetition in papermaking, *kami-ito*-making and weaving in relation to creating a meditative space for reflection, this research navigates through various transformation stages of repurposed fibre materials.

This supporting document is divided into five different sections. Firstly, it delves into the artistic methods applied in this research, focusing on the idea of materials, materiality, as well as sustainable values of making. Then, the paper inquires into how making through craft can become a methodology for navigation by emphasizing its collaborative potential; this section addresses the significance of making as a process of correspondence that involves both the maker and the materials. *Nidification* (fig. 2) and *Experiential Mapping* (fig. 3) are two bodies of work created during this research period. While one demonstrates a full cycle of material transformation as a means for crafting belonging in an *unfamiliar habitat*¹²,

¹² According to National Geographic, habitat refers to “[the] environment where an organism lives throughout the year or for shorter periods of time.” Consisting of food, water, space, and shelter, “a habitat is an environment that fulfills all the necessary conditions for an organism to survive. Jeannie Evers and Kara West, eds., “Habitat,” *Education*, 2023, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/habitat/>.

However, in my understanding, habitat not only indicates a place where I make it home with all the survival conditions I need physically, but it also refers to a place where I develop a psychological attachment to a long period of stay. It is more about the connection I develop with the people, natural surroundings, the culture and the communities within that living environment.

Unfamiliar habitat here refers to a place I live in but feel disconnected from.

the other explores the sensuous experience offered by textile installations. In the final section, "Chapter Closure," I reflect on my two-year research journey, rethinking the meaning of crafting and marking a continuation for exploring different possibilities for finding a sense of belonging during difficult times.

Material Exploration

This thesis project unfolds through a series of paper and textile installations that embody an exploration of materials with a keen focus on those that are found or repurposed. This exploration leads to two pivotal bodies of work: *Thinking Paper: Metamorphosing* (fig. 1) and *Experiential Mapping*, which collectively assemble the experimental samples derived from my material investigations. *Nidification* is an evolving woven sculpture that emerges as a distinct yet related exploration within the *Thinking Paper: Metamorphosing* installation. This section articulates different stages of material exploration in my research. Starting from the initial gathering and repurposing of materials to their transformation, the exploration culminates in various experimentation samples, emphasizing the process-oriented nature of craft. Together, this project has served as a physical manifestation of my inquiry into the role of handcrafted objects and how they can become a way to process the unresolved feelings associated with our changing environment.



Fig. 4. Reed grasses that the artist gathered. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5. The construction site near Hinge Park along False Creek, where the artist gathered the reed grass. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Gathering

This research is conducted with a keen awareness of the challenges posed by mass production and excessive material consumption. Aiming for sustainability in material use within the studio practice, my fundamental groundings are as follows:

- 1) Prioritize the use of reusable materials.
- 2) Set clear limits on resource harvesting and collection.
- 3) Fully utilizes all existing materials before acquiring new ones.
- 4) Minimize waste and environmental pollution in the studio practice.

To prepare for my exploration process, I began by sourcing leftover papermaking materials from my undergraduate studies¹³. This includes some partially processed cotton linter and cotton rags, and bast fibres such as abaca, *gampi* and Thai *kozo*¹⁴. With a limited supply of these materials, I expanded my search to include other fibre materials¹⁵ found in my local environment.

Reed grass (fig. 4) is a material I gathered near my apartment in Vancouver from areas where sanitation workers regularly trimmed it around the False Creek area (fig. 5). Observing the disposal of this organic waste makes me question where

¹³ Papermaking consists of two main stages: fibre preparation and sheet formation. In the fibre preparation stage, papermakers will cook or steam the raw fibre material with soda ash, then rinse the cooked fibres entirely to remove the soda ash residue and the foreign particles on the fibre. The well rinsed fibre will then be beaten in the stamper or paper Hollander beater to form into pulp, and ready for the sheet forming stage. Sieve-like Mould and deckle are used to formation the pulp into a sheet of paper. In a vat of cold water, papermakers will add in the prepared pulp and mixed it well. Then they will dip the mould and deckle into the vat of pulp and scoop up a sheet of wet paper. This sheet of wet paper will then be removed from the mould by couching (pressing) on to a piece of dampened felt and await to be pressed dry.

¹⁴ Partially processed fibre materials such as cotton linter and cotton rag are commonly used in the Western papermaking. They often come as a form of compressed and dried sheet of pulp which the cotton fibre from the plants is already processed and ready to be used for sheet formation. On the other hand, raw fibres such as abaca, *gampi* and Thai *kozo* refers as the bast fibres (inner-bark fibre) from the tree, they are largely used in the Eastern papermaking. Where *gampi* and *kozo* categorized as the woody bast fibre, and abaca as petiole fibre. Dried Bast fibres require pre-soaking and cook in soda ash first before beating into pulp and use to for sheet of papers.

¹⁵ Raw materials (fibre based) use in papermaking can be broadly classified into three categories: raw plant fibres, partially processes fibres, and recycled materials. The variety of fibre materials can be used for papermaking provides me with the opportunity to explore different plant fibres gathered in Vancouver.

these materials will end up and what they will turn into. The idea of recycling seems like the best alternative during the environmental crisis. However, the realities of the recycling process often overlook the environmental impact of secondary pollution and industrial labour. Adapting DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethics¹⁶ into my research inquiry, I obtained permission from the worker to collect this discarded reed grass and directly participate in the recycling process.

In addition, my exploration into handmade paper was enriched by contributions from my cohort member, Caitlin French. She generously shared barks from a fallen black cottonwood tree that she had gathered while conducting field research in the Squamish Valley (fig. 6) and some other plant fibres from her garden. Our collaborative efforts extended to a sustainable material practice within our studio exploration. In spring 2023, French cultivated some Japanese indigo plants together with the self-seeded indigo from the previous year in the ECU Oasis Garden. This cultivation led to a joint effort in the fall for a community harvest (fig. 7) and a pigment-making workshop in which Caitlin focused on creating indigo pigments from the leaves while I gathered the stalks for papermaking. This collaborative approach not only heightened my



Fig. 6. Caitlin and the black cotton barks she gathered. Photo courtesy of the artist.

¹⁶ DIY ethics here refers to the principle of personal responsibility in the process of making without the direct support from the experts. I also associate it with the handmade in craft which emphasizing the creativity and personal achievement as a way to avoid/reject mass-produced products and the mainstream institutional system when possible. This grounding is influenced by Elizabeth Garber's exploration of the ethics and practices of do-it-yourself culture within the framework of craft activism. For more of Garber's argument on the ethics of DIY, please visit: Elizabeth Garber, "Craft As Activism," *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* 33 (2013): 55–66, <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1394&context=jstae>.

awareness of the materials I use, but also underscored the potential for cross-discipline collaborations for utilizing materials to enhance sustainability in contemporary art practices.



Fig. 7. Indigo harvest at ECU Oasis Garden with Caitlin in spring 2023. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 8. Experimenting laser-cut on reed grass paper. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 9. Experiential installation of reed grass mobiles; reed grass papers were laser-cut first, then twist-folder to create spiral effects, 2022. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 10. Paper is wrapped around rocks and Styrofoam scrap pieces for casting. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 11. Paper made with abaca and black cotton bark, quilted in blanket form, and cast on a large rock forming a bowl structure. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Transforming

As a fibre material, handmade paper demonstrates a strong materiality through its fabrication¹⁷ and its transformation into creative works. Its flexible properties enable it to work collaboratively with various artistic mediums. By questioning what innovative approaches and techniques can be employed to expand the material vocabulary of papermaking, I aim to push the boundaries of the conventional use of paper. This phase of studio research reveals the potential and variability of handmade paper, as I experimented with laser cutting, folding, casting, and integrating techniques such as crocheting and sewing to investigate the limitations of this material (fig. 8 to fig. 11). The unique qualities of these handmade papers crafted from different fibre materials felt like opening Pandora's box – filled with both excitement and apprehension about the unknown outcomes of my



Fig. 12. These black cotton barks are soaked overnight, cooked and simmered in a soda ash solution for five hours. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 13. Example of *kyougi* sheet found in the studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

experiments.

One notable experiment involved black cotton bark (fig. 12), a material markedly different from others like *gampi* or *kozo* fibre I had previously worked on. This bark is reminiscent of compressed *kyougi*¹⁸ sheets (fig. 13). It is rigid and less fibrous, so working with it presents a unique challenge. Despite my attempts to adopt papermaking procedures to this bark material, it resisted my transformation. The unsuccessful attempts underscored the flaw in my assumption that all fibres could be

¹⁷ Papermaking process of pre-soaking, steaming/cooking, stripping, beating, and sheet forming.

¹⁸ *Kyougi* sheets are a type of Japanese paper made from wood shavings.

manipulated in the same manner (fig. 14 and fig.15).



Fig. 14. After processing with the simmering in soda ash solution, the black cotton barks are then cut into small pieces and beaten in the paper Hollander beater for ninety minutes. The bark is not beaten into pulp form but remains in a rigid fibre structure. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 15. Reed grass pulp compared with the black cotton bark "pulp," where the reed grass also underwent the same procedure as the bark. The plant fibre became mushy and pulpy after being beaten in the Hollander beater. Photo courtesy of the artist.



The experience of “failure” led me to put a pause on this experiment and rethink my approach to this material. The unsuccessfully processed bark ended up shredded in small pieces and became an additive in my abaca paper, which I used as textured paper that provides ridged support for paper casting (fig. 16). The remaining unprocessed bark became threading material, which I will discuss in more detail in the “Weaving” section of this chapter. My unsuccessful attempt to transform black cotton bark underlines the resistance offered by materials, and echoes the challenges and surprise inherent in artistic practice. This resistance is not a mere obstacle but an integral part of the material’s agency. It prompts me to rethink my approach and embrace the material’s contribution to the making.



Fig. 16. Paper blanket made with black cotton bark and abaca pulp and quilted with crochet technique, 2023. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Reflecting on this process, I find deep resonance with the thought of feminist philosopher Rachel Jones on the concept of not knowing. In her essay, "On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again and Letting Be," Jones discusses that the process of being able to unlearn is challenging and vulnerable; however, embracing uncertainty and the willingness to unlearn opens pathways to new ways of thinking and possibilities.¹⁹ More specifically, being able to let go of the desire to know – to know it all – "...calls on us to value others in their irreplaceable uniqueness and difference"²⁰ without forcing our own understanding upon them. This also mirrors Jane Bennett's concept of assemblages in *Vibrant Matter*, where the interplay between human and non-human forces in papermaking reveals a collaborative agency. She asserts that "...an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces."²¹ This experiment taught me the importance of releasing control and entering a collaborative engagement with materials with a facilitation approach rather than manipulation. This shift towards collaboration and openness to the unknown has encouraged me to approach materials with curiosity, seeking new possibilities without overpowering their innate characteristics.

¹⁹ Rachel Jones, "On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again and Letting Be," in *On Not Knowing, a Symposium Hosted by Kettle's Yard and New Hall College* (Cambridge: Kettle's Yard and New Hall College, 2009), 1–8.

²⁰ Ibid, 5.

²¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 21

Sheet to Thread – Kami-ito

Switching my focus to reed grass, which I gathered from a construction site near my apartment for material exploration, marked a remarkable shift in my papermaking journey. This fibre has a strong cellulose intertwining characteristic, providing a mushy and pulpy texture ideal for binding into paper after it is processed in the paper Hollander beater (fig. 17). Similar to reed grass, the Japanese indigo stalk also performed similar qualities, indicating the potential for diverse material use in papermaking. These successful experiments with reed grass and indigo stalks opened new directions for me to explore the

transformational capabilities of paper beyond its conventional two-dimensional form. Historically, paper played a versatile role in our lives. It was employed not only for documentation purposes, but was also used in household goods such as bags, umbrellas, lanterns and even clothes.²² This research opportunity prompts me to challenge the limits of material transformation and explore the innovative potential of handcrafted paper as a medium.

The idea of transforming paper into thread was inspired by my fascination with staring at the paper shredder and learning twisting techniques as part of cordage making at one of the seminar classes led by Caitlin French. This insight into utilizing old fabrics or textile materials for rope-



Fig. 17. The paper Hollander beater at the ECU printmaking studio, which the artist uses to conduct her studio research. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 18. Documentation of *kami-ito* making process: washi paper being folded and cut into strips. Photo courtesy of the artist.

²² Timothy Barrett, *Japanese Papermaking: Traditions, Tools, Techniques* (Warren, CT: Floating World Editions, 2005), 7.

making sparked the idea to experiment similarly with my reed grass paper. In the summer of 2023, my material exploration took a significant turn as I connected with Sabrina Sachiko, a Vancouver-based *shifu*²³ (paper cloth) weaver who is dedicated to the traditional Japanese craft of making *kami-ito*²⁴ (paper thread). Under Sachiko's generous guidance, I developed a new set of technical skills, allowing me to venture into the unexplored possibilities of my handcrafted paper.

Making *kami-ito* is an intricate and slow practice deeply intertwined with the maker's physicality. Under Sachiko's guidance, our workshop begins with moments of silence and repetitions of deep breaths to center ourselves into a state of focus and self-collection. I find the ritualistic nature of *kami-ito* making is akin to papermaking, where both practices involve repetitive bodily movements that cultivate a state of meditation. The preparatory stillness in the maker's mentality sets a tone for the making process. The process starts



Fig. 19. After cutting the washi paper into strips, open it up and lay it flat to prepare for resting on a damp cloth overnight. Photo courtesy of the artist.

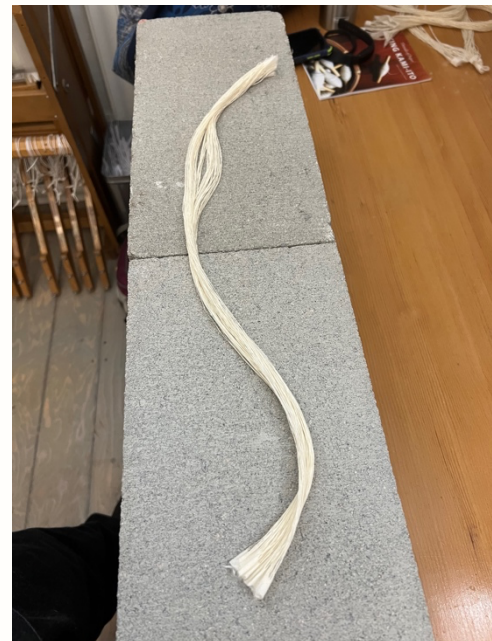


Fig. 20. Damped paper strips will then be rolled on cement blocks overnight. Photo courtesy of the artist.

²³ *Shifu* is a Japanese term for a cloth woven with paper thread either in the warp, weft, or both. 1. Hiroko Karuno, "Shifu: A Traditional Paper Textile of Japan," DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2016, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/977/?utm_source=digitalcommons.unl.edu%2Ftsaconf%2F977&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages, 254.

²⁴ *Kami-ito*: *Kami* means paper in Japanese, *ito* means thread. Hiroko Karuno, "Introduction," essay, in *Kigami and Kami-Ito: Japanese Handmade Paper and Paper Thread* (Toronto, ON: Hiroko Karuno, 2013), 8.

by meticulously folding washi papers and cutting them into 2mm strips while leaving a one-inch margin at the edge (fig. 18 and fig. 19). These strips are then laid on a damp cloth, wrapped in plastic, and left to rest overnight, allowing the moisture to soften them for rolling on cement blocks. The rolling process is a systematic sequence of gathering, rolling, shaking, flipping, rolling, shaking, stretching, and repeating, where the friction between paper and cement twists the strips into threads (fig. 20 and fig. 21). The twisted threads then separate into one continuous thread and are strengthened by spinning²⁵ onto a bobbin with a box charkha²⁶ (fig. 22 and 23). To finish, bobbins are steamed to set the twist, and after they cool down, threads are dried in skeins.

This labour-intensive process of transforming flat paper strips into twisted threads is meditative yet demands a lot of patience and preciseness in balancing pressure and moisture levels in the making process. According to Sachiko, there is no singular approach to the rolling technique;



Fig. 21. Frictions between the paper and the cement will cause the strip to twist into thread form. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 22. The separated paper thread is spun onto a bobbin with a box charkha. Photo courtesy of the artist.

²⁵ Spinning is a textile term, here it refers to the technical twist to the thread for strengthening purposes.

²⁶ Box Charkha is a portable Indian spinning wheel, it comes in various sizes.

it is a personalized process that reflects the unique characteristics of each type of paper and the maker's intuition. This realization led me to a deeper understanding – to let the material lead. The two different fibres in my handmade papers require adaptation to the rolling technique with guidance from the paper's response to moisture and manipulation. To work with them, I have to be constantly engaged in the process.

This interactive dialogue between maker and material resonates with anthropologist Tim Ingold's idea that making is a process of correspondence²⁷, which I will explore further in the following chapter, "Craft as methodology." In crafting *kami-ito*, I engage in correspondence with the material, where through a back-and-forth conversation between the material and myself, I become a participator or one of the "materials" in this creation process. To proceed forward, I have to constantly engage with the materials I process and experience (being in) the transformation rather than observing (being with) it. This approach emphasizes the foundational relationship between the maker and the material and has profoundly influenced my creation process for the thesis project. In the following section, "Weaving," I will discuss how I utilized the *kami-ito* I made and how this artifact became a transition to sculpture and installation.



Fig. 23. Bobbins and a skein of *kami-ito*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

²⁷ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 31.

Weaving

Following the thread of kami-ito making, my thesis research extends into an exploratory weaving practice, where I delve into the materiality and visual qualities of my handmade kami-ito. With the support of Jen Hiebert, a technician and weaver at the ECU Soft Shop, Jane Stafford Textile's online resources, and my MFA cohort, I began a journey on papermaking and weaving that has gradually revealed the entanglement between material, time, and space. Echoing the collaborative agency in materials, weaving, much like papermaking and *kami-ito* making, became a form of kinship with the material through the extensive time I spent working with the loom and the development of the cloth artifact. This kinship developed in the making process creates a space for me to reflect on the significance of handicrafts in today's industrialized society.

The weaving process begins with a chosen pattern that sparks my curiosity. Instead of predetermining weaving patterns or structures for my thesis projects, *Nidification* and *Experiential Mapping*, I focus on the assemblage of weaving samples that represent my exploratory journey in this new medium. As a beginner, I

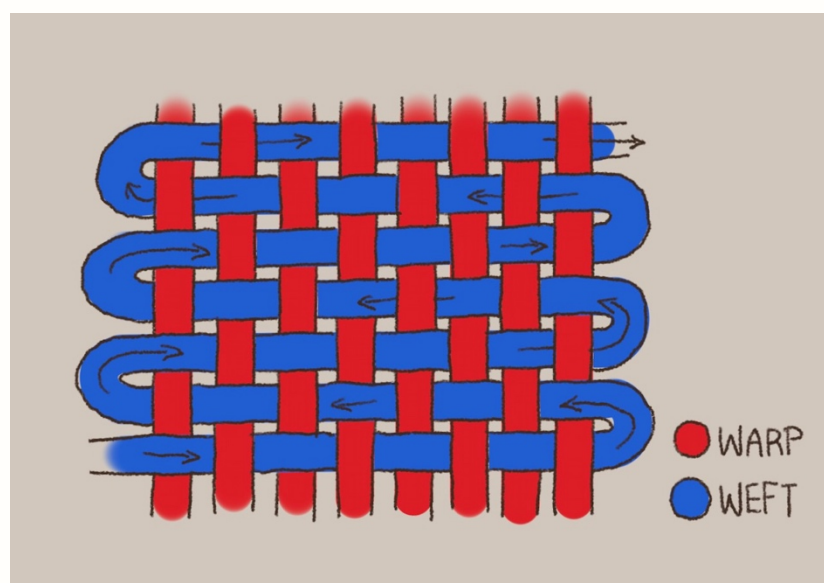


Fig. 24. Draft Illustration from the artist demonstrates the plain-weave structure.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

primarily engage with the *tabi* (plain weave) pattern – a fundamental structure weaved on a two or four-shaft loom²⁸, and it is characterized by the alternate crossing – over and under – of warp²⁹ and weft³⁰ threads that bind the fabric tightly (fig. 24).

I initially aimed for perfection – a cloth that is evenly tensioned with clean and straight weaving edges – in my plain weave creations; however, I quickly encountered the learning curve’s inevitable challenges, such as threading mistakes and tension irregularities. Despite my frustration with the initial imperfections, they



Fig. 25. Weaving sample of reed grass *kami-ito* in plain weave.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

²⁸ Shaft also refers to harness; on a loom, it relates to the frame where heddles are suspended. A two/four shaft loom is a type of weaving loom which contains two or four shafts that can be raised and lowered in various combinations to create different weaving patterns.

²⁹ Refers to the threads that run vertically along the length of the loom, crossed by the weft threads.

³⁰ Refers to the threads that run horizontally across the loom and interlaced with the warp thread to create a woven structure.



Fig. 26. Weaving sample of reed grass *kami-ito* in plain weave with different cramming and spacing patterns. Photo courtesy of the artist.

also inspired me to play with the density, spacing and texture of my weaves, mainly to showcase the unique qualities of my *kami-ito*. Fig. 25 and 26 are woven examples of reed grass *kami-ito* and cotton threads. By adjusting the cramming and spacing within the weave and incorporating different sizes with the warp and weft threads, I can highlight the distinctive characteristics of *kami-ito*, creating textiles with varied density and an airy, delicate sensibility.

This exploration led me to embrace the inherent irregularities of handweaving as a form of artistic expression, distinguishing my work from mass-produced textiles. The slow, rhythmic interaction with the loom allows me to integrate experimental materials like the unprocessed black cottonwood bark as the

weft with my *kami-ito*. The interplay between these two materials results in an unpredictable and animate textile piece (fig. 27). The unexpected outcome enables me to shift my perception as part of the interacting entities rather than focusing on the pre-determination of the imagery of the work. This approach aligns with Ingold's view on how the world is constructed as "[a] meshwork of entangled lines of life, growth and movement"³¹ rather than intersection points connected only by human agency. Weaving here becomes a metaphor for understanding the interconnectedness of life and growth in the world I inhabit. I see time as the foundational warp set in all dimensions, and I become a thread on the shuttle. While shuttling across space and time, I encounter different entities and dialogues are created through different ways of interaction. By corresponding to these entities, I then intertwine with them, move forward, and expand as an interwoven structure – a "web of life."³² In the following chapter, I will further explore how craft serves as a methodological lens to understand potential pathways for coexistence and connection in our shared environment.

³¹ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mohamed_Mourad_Lafifi/post/Im_searching_a_list_of_generic_haptic_descriptors_and_generic_haptic_anomalies_Existing_list/attachment/59d6418579197b807799d7d5/AS%3A435121871429633%401480752546806/download/Tim+ingold-being-alive.pdf, 62.

³² Ibid

Collaborations in Craft



Fig. 27. Left: Xiaoyin Luo, *Untitled*, 2023. Woven cloth with black cotton barks and washi kami-ito. Right: Photography installation from MFA cohort member, Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Through engaging with various crafts, I gradually came to a realization that the act of making embodies a holistic state where the maker, materials, techniques, and forms coalesce through constant collaborations. This collaborative essence in making processes serves as an antidote, allowing us to craft belonging amidst the overwhelming state of today's world. This approach also provides a chance and holds space for individuals to resituate themselves relationally to the current environment. Anthropologist Tim Ingold encourages us to think about human making as a form of correspondence, "a process of *growth*...[where] to place the maker from the outset as a participant in amongst a world of active materials."³³ My exploration of papermaking, kami-ito making, and weaving led me to the creation of works through an active engagement with materials rather than enforcing a preconceived form in my mind. This process of mutual response between the maker and the materials is where collaboration happens, and together, they proceed forward. This approach to materials in making processes reminds me of the discussion on craft as inherently collaborative, as explored in the book, *Collaboration Through Craft*, edited by Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle and Helen Felcey. They describe that "the openness of craft to the contingent and the unknown – the maker's ability to respond to the interwoven lines of the meshwork of which they are part – is an important key to craft's social character and its collaborative potentials."³⁴ While Ravetz, Kettle and Felcey's perspective is closely related to Ingold's suggestion on how to conceive the world as a giant meshwork, I see craft – with its collaborative potential – as a method to foster co-creation and coexistence within our living environment.

The way I think about craft is that it offers diverse ways of thinking, knowing, and imagining in a world bearing the irreversible impacts of environmental degradation. Amidst the urgency to reflect and seek a sustainable survival

³³ Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 21.

³⁴ Helen Felcey, Amanda Ravetz, and Alice Kettle, *Collaboration through Craft* (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 3.

approach, hands-on making allows us to be critically engaged with the world that is suffering from material excess. The meditative and slow making process offers space for individuals to reflect on the fast-paced, information-saturated environment. As my material explorations emphasize, the act of making, learning, and transforming is inherently collaborative, working with craft enables us to shift our focus to the materials and transformation journey rather than the final object that we conceive “as distinct from the process of their emergence and decay.”³⁵ This approach allows us to reconsider the role of matter, and recognize its vital participation in shaping realities in this world. By actively engaging in the making processes, I am able to forge a series of connections through interacting with the material (fibre materials, machines and tools) in my studio practice, opening my perceptions to the surrounding world and responding to them accordingly. This concept of *correspondence*³⁶, as well as what anthropologist Hirokazu Miyazaki calls the *method of hope*³⁷, provides us an opportunity to shifts our experience with the world away from rigid planning and scientific prediction. Rather, the concept allows us to engage with the world in a participatory manner³⁸, focus on real time and inquire through interacting with it. In the subsequent chapters, I will explore how the construction of this thesis project embodies a sense of self-realization and how the tactile presence reinforces the sensory connection and experience between the viewer and the work.

³⁵ Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, “Art and Death,” essay, in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London, England: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 3-29. Also seen in Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch, *The New Politics of the Handmade: Craft, Art and Design* (London, England: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022), 5.

³⁶ Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 7

³⁷ Hirokazu Miyazaki, *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). Also seen in Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 7

³⁸ According to Ingold, the concept of participatory engagement is central to understanding the interconnectedness of human creativity, environment and materiality. He proposes that making is not just about the imposition of form upon material but is a process of engagement and response, a way of knowing and being in a world that is inherently participatory. Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*.

Nidification



Fig. 28. Xiaoyin Luo, *Nidification* (1st version), 2023. Cotton thread, linen thread, handmade reed grass *kami-ito*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

My inquiry into craft within the material world is embodied through *Nidification* (fig. 28), a woven sculpture that interprets the transformation of reed grass into a tactile form. This body of work is part of the *Thinking Paper: Metamorphosing* installation in the ECU State of Practice show, which evolves with its install environment and showcases an assemblage of weaving samples created from reed grass kami-ito. The word nidification is derived from the Latin – *nidificare* – meaning to build a nest. This intent of building a place to land mirrors my approach to constructing this sculpture, where I utilize the making process to craft a sense of belonging and sanctuary in response to the material.



Fig. 29. Hei Yu, 草·书 / 金刚经 Verses by Rushes: *Diamond Sutra*, 2021, handmade rush paper fibre, 宁波阪急百货, 宁波, accessed November 12, 2023, https://m.sohu.com/a/491810039_362042?trans_=010004_pcwzy. Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.



Fig. 30. Hei Yu, 草书 · 金刚经 *Verses by Rushes: Diamond Sutra*, 2021, details of handmade rush paper fibre, accessed November 12, 2023, https://news.sohu.com/a/592249286_121123856. Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.

Influenced by fibre artist Hei Yu's³⁹ perception of materials as entities undergoing cycles of birth, death, and reincarnation, the artistic approach toward my material explorations also considers the lifecycle of materials and my role as a participator in this transformation process. In his work, 草·书 / 金刚经 (*Verses by Rushes: Diamond Sutra*) (fig. 29 and 30), Hei uses the trimmed-off parts of rushes – a leftover material he collected from a rush mat factory in Ningbo – to make paper for sculptures and installation. Part of the significance of Hei's work is burning characters onto paper using lit incense as his artistic expression. Through labour-intensive processes and the experience of the slow passing of time, Hei sees the act of burning and leaving marks on the paper as a reflective practice to learn respect and develop a sense of humility for the material.

My commitment to utilizing repurposed materials such as reed grass, black cottonwood bark and indigo stalks in my practice resonates with Hei's approach to sustainable material practice. I position myself as part of the materials in the transformation process, where I immerse in the process of papermaking, kami-ito making and weaving; this experience transcends mere observations and becomes an interaction. The essence of my creation lies in the interaction between materials,

³⁹ Note: in Chinese culture, family name comes first, then followed by the given name.

guiding me through a transformative and humbling experience toward a sense of humility with the environment. This approach animates the materials within my artistic practice and establishes a sustainable connection with my surroundings. It guides me to a respectful and appreciative stance towards the land I inhabit now. While the artwork presented in the gallery serves as a testament to my engagement with these materials, it also signifies the commencement of a new lifecycle for them. As they intervene in the space, they become an ongoing dialogue between the creator, the material, and the viewer.

Crafting Space



Fig. 31. Xiaoyin Luo, *Nidification* (2nd version) (detail), 2023. Cotton thread, linen thread, handmade reed grass kami-ito. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 32. Xiaoyin Luo, *Experiential Mapping* (detail), 2023. Woven textiles with cotton thread, handmade washi *kami-ito*, reed grass *kami-ito*, black cotton barks, hand-spun linen thread, Japanese indigo paper strips. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In the essay "Fabrication and Encounter," Paula Owen discusses how the process of making and the interactions that objects facilitate contribute to the content and meaning of art. She highlights the dynamic nature of objects as connectors to thoughts, memories, sensations, histories, and relationships that offer open-ended interpretations⁴⁰. This perspective is insightful, and I attempt to vividly embody it in my thesis projects. The tactile and nostalgic qualities of textiles in *Nidification* (fig. 31) and *Experiential Mapping* (fig. 32) invite an open dialogue between the viewer and the artwork. In both of these works, the installation's spatial arrangement holds space to allow viewers to engage intimately with the work from all angles and establish a personal connection to the work based on their interpretation.

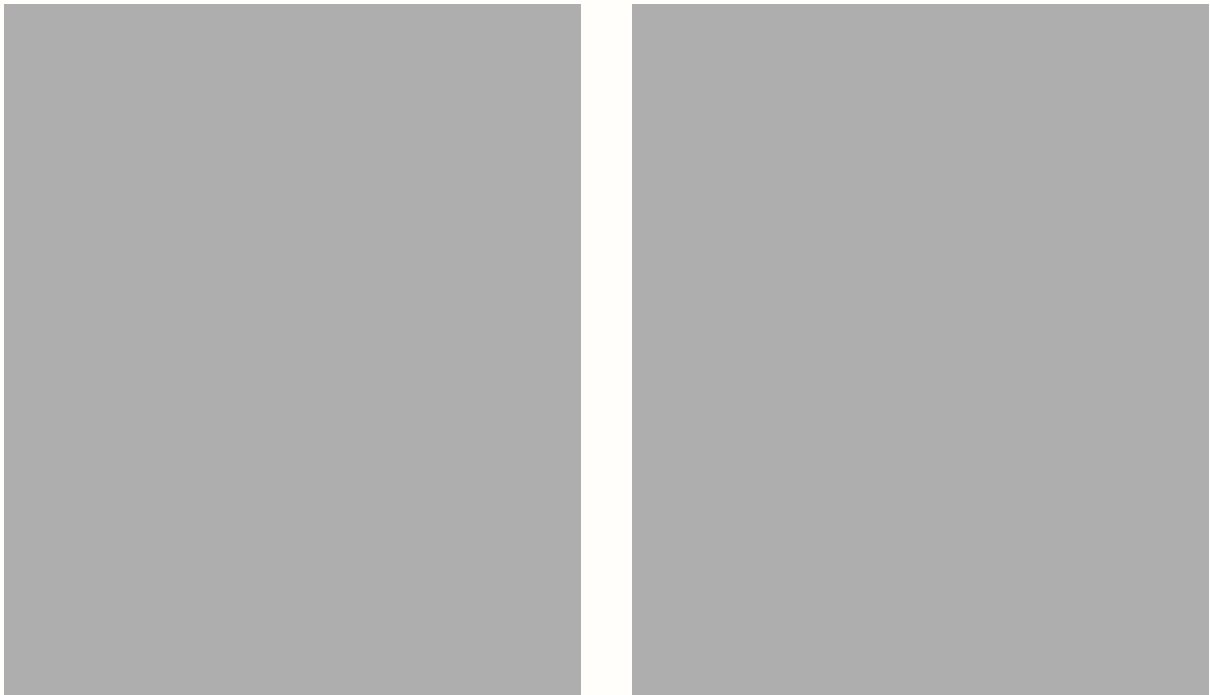


Fig. 33. Mackenzie Frère, *(im)material beauty*, 2005, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Nova Scotia, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://mackenziekellyfrere.com/#/immaterial-beauty/>. Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.

⁴⁰ Paula Owen, "Fabrication and Encounter: When Content Is a Verb," essay, in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (London, England: Duke University Press, 2011), 83–96.

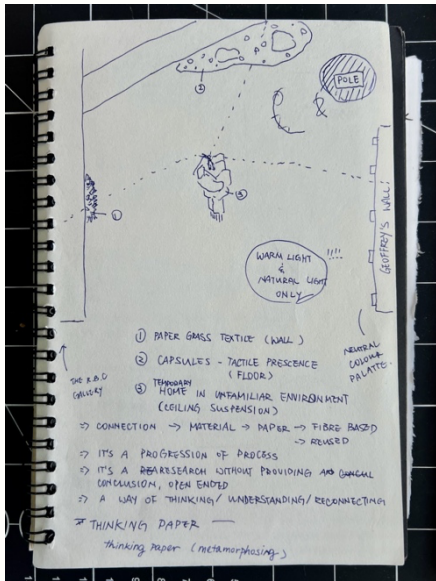


Fig. 35. Draft of installation plan for the State of Practice Exhibition. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In my work, I delve into the sentimental connections formed with the object through both its tangible and intangible qualities. These range from the tactile nature of the fabric to the handmade, evident in its creation and the material's inherent familiarity with our everyday lives, invoking a sense of comfort and nostalgia. This familiarity is not just about the physicality of the material but also the memories and emotions it evokes. This blend of qualities bridges the gap between the artwork and the viewer, allowing the

experience to be personal, associative, and responsive, akin to a conversation⁴¹.

Textile artist Mackenzie Frere's exploration of *(im)material beauty* (fig. 33) parallels my approach, where he explores the aesthetic memory embedded in handwoven cloths, highlighting how the intangible aspects of cloth shape our perception and can transform our thinking processes⁴². My work extends this exploration beyond the materiality of textiles, delving into the transformative potential these materials hold. In *Experiential Mapping*, by incorporating diverse fibre materials such as raw fibres, hand-spined threads, and paper strips into my weaving, I craft textures that invite visual and tactile engagement, culminating in an aesthetic resonance when displayed together in a gallery setting. The installation transforms the space, imbuing it with softness, airiness, and expansiveness that invites viewers to shift between observing and immersing themselves, thus enriching the sensory experience.

⁴¹ Ibid., 86.

⁴² Mackenzie Frère, "immaterial Beauty," essay, in *Craft Perception and Practice Vol III*, ed. Nisse Gustafson and Amy Gogarty (Vancouver, BC: Ronsdale Press, 2007), 107–12.

The installation *Thinking Paper: Metamorphosing* (fig. 34) further exemplifies this approach by utilizing weaving, sewing, crocheting, and moulding to explore the materiality of paper, presenting a multifaceted view of the material exploration process. To enhance engagement, I strategically laid out the exhibition space to encourage viewers to navigate around the installations (fig. 35). By adjusting the wall to form an obtuse angle at the entrance, I created a welcoming environment that guides the viewer through the space, encouraging them to move around and observe the work from various angles. This setup not only highlights the sculptures' textural intricacies but also involves the viewer with a dynamic experience. To fully appreciate the detail in each piece, viewers are invited to adopt different positions – leaning close, stepping back, or adjusting their gaze – thus engaging with the art on multiple levels. This approach not only showcases the versatility of paper as a medium but also transforms the act of viewing into an active exploration of form and texture.



Fig. 34. Xiaoyin Luo, *Thinking Paper: Metamorphosing* (overhead installation view), 2023. Handmade paper objects with cotton, abaca, black cotton barks, Japanese indigo stalks, linen thread, handmade reed grass *kami-ito*. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 36. Evelyn Roth, *Environment for Reading Recycled from 110 Sweaters*, 1974. Photograph taken by Rachel Topham, 2018, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://belkin.ubc.ca/exhibitions/beginning-with-the-seventies-glut/>. Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.

Environment for Reading Recycled from 110 Sweaters (fig. 36), a textile installation by Canadian artist Evelyn Roth, transforms traditional gallery dynamics by engaging viewers with the interconnectedness of materials. Roth's sculptural installation, which is made with repurposed sweaters, invites viewers to participate and experience the installation, thus retrieving their sensitivity and challenging them to reconsider the environmental impact of art practices within a capitalist framework. By knitting a welcoming space, she promotes the use of eco-friendly materials, aiming to deepen the relationship between art, sensitivity, and environmental awareness⁴³. In contrast with Roth, my thesis project crafts space that invites curiosity, empathy, and reflection by emphasizing visual and sensory connection through material familiarity. By creating exploratory woven objects and engaging with the space, my work seeks to offer a sanctuary for viewers to confront and process the unease of our time.

⁴³ Evelyn Roth Arts 74 (John Davis, 2007), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hG1ZoHBylD4&t=1s>.

Chapter Closure



Fig. 37. Xiaoyin Luo, *Nidification*, Kindred—MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2024. Woven sculpture installation with cotton thread, linen thread, reed grass kami-ito, Japanese indigo stalk kami-ito. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Working with slow-processed materials has been a journey into self-realization. Through my studio practice and material research, I have gradually established a way to resituate myself amidst today's environmental and existential crises. In my thesis exhibition, I have installed two bodies of work, *Nidification* and *Experiential Mapping*. The work *Nidification* (fig. 37) is a woven sculpture that evolved into an installation that grew into the gallery space. After the State of Practice exhibition, as I continued to explore various materials for kami-ito making and applied them to weaving, the nest building continued. This installation assembly mimics the way birds weave their nests and spiders knit their webs in their natural habitat. I began by gathering fibre materials, processing them, and then weaving them into a nest. The process of making the nest is a way for me to create space for engagement.

Being able to work closely with the materials at hand allows me to forge a relationship with the other-than-human beings who share the same living environment as me, and I honour them by offering my time and labour. The time I spent with my materials offered me a chance for meditation, which opened up space for me to rethink my relationship with the land and to process and engage with my unresolved feelings about the loss of land due to the climate crisis. I see working collaboratively with different natural materials in my practice as my way of grieving, providing a portal for me to engage with other beings that also live on this land and to consider how we can coexist during such troubled times.

The other work, *Experiential Mapping* (fig. 38), is a process-based textile installation based on the material research I conducted in this MFA program. The focus of this work is to showcase the interplay and collaborative results between the artist and the materials. My approach to this installation is based on the idea of flux, thinking about how to live in a world that is constantly shifting. The transformative and collaborative moments in my material research on handmade paper suggested a way to approach and adopt the unfixable state of the current environment.



Fig. 38. Xiaoyin Luo, *Experiential Mapping*, Kindred—MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2024. Woven textile installation with cotton thread, handmade *washi kami-ito*, reed grass *kami-ito*, Japanese indigo stalk *kami-ito*, black cottonwood bark, hand-spun linen thread and handmade paper strips. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Through a series of actions and decision-making with natural fibre materials and the kami-ito made out from them. This installation embodies a variation in texture, the application of weaving techniques and the trace of my body movement.

During the process of making each individual weaving, I altered the technique and patterns based on the type of fibre materials and the size of the loom I worked with. This evolving process of making shaped my perspective on the uncertainties of the unknown; the flexible mode of thinking and making suggests there is always an opportunity for change based on what I currently have. The raw and unfinished details in the work are where I left hints suggesting this is an ongoing process. The unfixable gesture of the work is my attempt to shift the audience's experience of looking at an art object with distance into a curiosity engagement. Through this textile installation, I aim to offer the audience an insight into my methodology for relationship-building that highlights the trace of time, labour and the correspondence between me and the fibres.

Through material exploration with papermaking, kami-ito making and weaving in relation to the craft theory of collaboration, this research not only serves as a medium for artistic expression but also as a critical inquiry into the interconnectedness of human and non-human existence within the context of environmental decline. As my exploratory journey unfolds, it becomes clear that the act of crafting is not just a method for artistic production; it is also a transformative process that invites us to reimagine our relationship with the world. Through this thesis research, I navigated the complexities of material exploration as a way to confront and engage with the unease in our lives, proposing craft as a vital and enriching methodology for inquiry and understanding in times of existential crises.

During the thesis exhibition installation, I invited my mom to participate in the building process. Her openness to engage with my art practice and her curiosity to learn the craft I was doing inspired me to seek the potential for future community engagement. The therapeutic property of crafting emerges from the time I spent

with the material, with my mom at home, teaching her how to spin threads and crochet. That very moment we spent quietly together, focusing on what we have in our hands, holds space for conversations about the existential unease we feel.

As this exhibition support paper marks the end of a research chapter, I am excited to continue my material-oriented research on craft, utilizing the idea of crafting as a way to approach and address the challenges we face in the current world. Craft will continue to be a vital navigation tool for me to engage with the land reciprocally. The time we spend with materials in the crafting process not only holds space for us to honour and grieve for loss, but it also provides a leeway for us to find solace within ourselves and the environment that we are in. This potential for healing offers an alternative view to dabbling with the existential crisis, encouraging us to engage with these matters positively and be open to the diversity of solutions.

As we live in a time of trouble, crafting antidotes is an intention that comprises my research and will be ongoing. Moving forward, I am curious to delve into the potential roles traditional craft practices can play in the discourse of sustainability. By questioning how these practices can be utilized to engage public interest and action toward environmental conservation, I anticipate expanding my artistic research on craft as a stepping stone for the conversation of excessive material consumption in today's industrialized society. As a creative individual, I am keen to continue my material-based craft practice as a way to engage with troubles, to live with troubles and to reconcile with troubles. This research chapter opens up an opportunity to (re)imagine a collective engagement with our present and near futures with the land appreciatively and collaboratively.

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