Love Labors

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LOVE LABORS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Art
Visual Art

by
Ashley Felder
May 2021

Accepted by:
Dave Detrich, Committee Chair
Dr. Beth Lauritis
Anderson Wrangle
ABSTRACT

Quilting-making carries associations of domestic and traditionally feminine labor and an intersection of art and life that lends itself to the layering of perspectives. It is an art form that is greater than the sum of its parts. The tactility of the quilt extends a metaphoric engagement centered on our sense of touch, how we are touched by nature and how we touch it. The quilts in this body of work draw upon deliberately slow and sensual processes of construction that employ physical and visual texture, expansive ranges of color usage, photographic image, stitched lines, and pattern to describe encounters with nature I have experienced over the past year. Those experiences range from relocating to my family’s farm due to the coronavirus pandemic, tending to a garden, walking through the forest, and raising silkworms. Combining historical photographic contact printing processes with textiles, I expose images onto cloth and further illuminate them with embroidery thread applications. I also gather and cultivate natural materials for dyes that likewise index the local landscape. These photographic images along with the sourcing of dye materials position the pieces within the environments they represent. Some works contain organic elements that will inevitably decay or are already decaying. This inclusion replicates the fragile and ever-changing state of the environment as well as the beauty of natural cycles.

Direct contact with nature drives my artistic process but also describes a human need that is ever increasing in the digital age. Increasing mindful contact with the natural world, through whatever means available, leads to the realization that we are part of nature and not apart from it. Understanding this will hopefully lead to more sustainable practice, and a gentler touch, as we consider our role as stewards of the earth.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge my family for your continuous love and support. Thank you for accepting my work even when you didn’t always understand it. Thank you for always being there for me, especially during the summer of 2020. I love and appreciate y’all so much.

I would like to acknowledge my committee for your unique perspectives that have influenced my thinking during my time at Clemson. Dave, our Monday morning conversations were always poignant, and you encouraged me to think about art in ways that transcended my understanding prior to graduate school. Your sense of humor and kindness were consistent, as were your subtle questions that helped me understand my process. Thank you for your patience, positivity, and puns. Anderson, thank you for encouraging all of my experiments, your interesting lectures and demos, and exposing me to myriad of artists and processes. Thank you also for your shared enthusiasm for nature and adventure. Beth, working with you has been such a pleasure. Thank you for your challenging questions and taking time to discuss my research with me after class on Zoom. You made the experience of working remotely so much better. Thank y’all for everything.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

It’s a hot July morning on the farm. My dad labors in a field, as my grandmother makes bread from scratch in her kitchen, and my mother and sister are busy with the tasks of the day. The sun brushes like warm butter on my skin as I walk, barefoot, basket in hand, to my garden to pluck all the blossoms for a dye bath. I fill the basket to the brim with flowers. The petals, yellow and orange, would create colors that matched the sun’s rays. After the dye has set in the cloth, I pull a sheet of gold out of the water, watch it drip and fill with sunlight in the air, rinse, and hang to a fence to dry. In a few days, the blossoms replenish themselves and I go out to start the process once more.

I had many beautiful encounters with nature when I returned home in March of 2020 after the Covid-19 pandemic closed Clemson University’s doors and stay at home orders had been set. Like many others during this difficult year, I turned to nature as a salve for loneliness and uncertainty and found healing and restorative strength there. Returning to my family’s farm for the longest stay since tenth grade greatly impacted my studio practice. I was returning to a place where I learned that I loved art and nature in equal measure, and often saw them as part of one another. I was returning to a hard-working agrarian community where my family had farmed since the 1800’s. This is a place where my family’s history and labors are stitched into the landscape. Reconnecting to my roots came as a result of a monstrous pandemic, but I am grateful I had a home to which I could return.

I treated my time on the farm like an artist residency, exploring modalities of art making that aligned with my desire to immerse myself in the natural world. I made ephemeral, site-specific installations that utilized native plants as well as cultivated flowers from my garden. I
learned to dye fibers with natural materials which lead me to discover my love for sewing. I also used photography to record these experiences, from documentation with film and digital photography, to printing plants onto fabric with cyanotype chemistry. These methods of working directly with natural cycles, the tactility of traditional labor, and slow, sensuous and sustainable relationships with material, became the groundwork for my thesis.

The work in this series spans from the time I spent in quarantine back home last summer to my return to upstate South Carolina the following fall. They are extensions of the natural materials from which they are made and reflect my personal experiences with nature, from tending a garden, to walking in the forest, to raising silkworms. Inspiration comes from my encounters with nature over the past year as well as the ethos of my hardworking and loving agrarian family. The title for this thesis, *Love Labors*, is both a noun as well as a statement. I owe all that I am to the love labors of my parents and grandparents who, if nothing else, taught me that we are here to work for and take care of each other. Observing the loving labors of my family from my mother, tending to the home and garden to my father, tending to the fields of crops and livestock to my grandmother in her kitchen, has prompted me to explore new ways of making that relate to cultivation and handwork. Although the quilt is traditionally a domestic utilitarian object, I am utilizing its history and framework by choosing to operate within the context of contemporary art.

Quilts, through art or utility, metaphorically signify care, gentleness, protection, warmth, and healing. The quilt is akin to a body, it is made to touch, it implies concern for another. It is about the reciprocal relationship of humans and nature that too often becomes one-sided. My work engages the viewer by prompting them to consider themselves as being more directly connected to their environments, part of the cycles they observe in the natural world, and thereby carry some responsibility to care for it.
Some works integrate delicate, organic matter that will deteriorate with time, becoming brittle or faded or even turn to dust. This includes dried flowers, dried fungi, dried leaves, and dead moths that are fragile to the touch. Observing natural cycles and responding with the quotidian activity of stitching, makes the process of making a meditation on how we interact with nature. Could we be more intentional with our handling of her? What could we learn from more careful observation? What is lost in the name of progress? I contend that the quilt is a powerful and poetic tool that is as relevant now as ever. My thesis work uses quilts and other mediums to pose questions about our relationship to nature.

These concerns regarding how we touch and are touched by nature may be further expressed through this excerpt from a 1978 ecofeminist book by Susan Griffin entitled, *Woman and Nature, the Roaring Inside Her* that was performed in a socially distanced, spoken word collaboration in 2020 with contemporary artists Suzanne Lacey, Andrea Bowers and others titled *This Earth, What She is to Me.* (Lacey)

As I go into her, she pierces my heart  
As I penetrate further, she unveils me  
When I reach her center, I am weeping openly  
I have known her all my life, yet she reveals stories to me  
These stories are revelations, and I am transformed  
Each time I go to her, I am born like this

She is as delicate as I am  
She is as delicate as I am  
She is as delicate as I am
CHAPTER TWO
MARIGOLDS & QUILTING

Soon after returning home, I decided to plot a fresh garden. I have always had a weakness for flowers, and much of the garden was devoted to them. I first experimented with art making that involved placing natural materials directly into the land, which included the cultivated flowers from the garden as well as wildflowers and other plants. These materials were accessible, free, sensual, and ephemeral, a way of touching the earth very gently while articulating aspects of the landscape. *Mud Puddle 1 and 2* (figures 1 and 2) are both at the edge of fields on the farm, where tractors, trucks, and herds of cattle deepen and widen them over time. They are evidence of my father’s labor and have swallowed my shoes more than once. These mud puddles are also part of my home. They are akin to measuring sticks and looking at their border signify how long it has been since rainfall.

Marigolds, being as auspicious as they are healing, offer protection in a garden. I used these flowers in the landscape in the farm to make sites that hold personal meaning for me. In *Swamp Lace* (figure 3), I stitched marigolds together in my garden and draped them like lace creating a link or a boundary between two trees in the swamp. In *Silo Solstice* (figure 4), I splayed them out at the bottom of the old silo on the summer solstice, mirroring the open sky light above, holding the space that my great grandfather once filled high with grains. On my last day at home, I filled a bald patch in the hay field (figure 5) where I spent most of my mornings, symbolizing my body and presence there that would soon wither into absence. These actions were ways of celebrating these spaces that are close to my heart because they relate to the feeling of coming and going: every time I return home, something has changed; every-time I leave, I leave part of myself.
I saw beautiful strands of marigold that marked holy sites and adorned the necks of people in celebratory and spiritual events during time that I spent in India in 2015. As I remembered the visual and symbolic impact of those garlands, I began stitching together the flowers from my garden and sewed them into the landscape and the quilt sculptures. These stitches are links between nature and my own hands. They represent the labor my family has stitched into this place and the connection we share because of it. My photographs, Swamp Lacing (figure 6) and Sky Stitching (figure 7) document moments in the construction of flower pieces I made on the farm and emphasize that the action of these are also content. The act of connecting points with strings of flowers is what creates that direct contact with nature that is embedded in all of my thesis work.

I realized that I could use the flowers I grew or found in nature to dye cloth, which led me to discover my love for sewing and, eventually, quilting. A serendipitous meeting with an old family friend led to this discovery. She had spent the past few years learning to quilt like her grandmother had before her. She showed me her process and tools, which I found deeply inspiring. She was continuing a tradition of feminine expression from previous generations, passing some of that knowledge on to me, a younger generation. Again, I saw the potential for a practice that combined my desire to use sustainable materials with a way of making that would be readable by my family as well as my art community. I taught myself to quilt based on what I saw.

At this time, I had limited experience sewing and my first quilt top lacked refinement, so I built lightweight structures that I could stretch my dyed fabric over as well as cyanotypes of flowers from my garden. Cyanotypes are a low cost and low-tech method of contact printing that appealed to me because I could expose them with the sun and develop them with a water hose. I used marigolds dyed on muslin that “caught” the light of the sunrise and sunset (figures 8 and 9). These quilt objects are presented as photographs. The photograph enables me to connect the
viewer to the landscape in which they were created and how they occupy physical presence there. These pieces began my inquiry into how quilts may reveal something about the environment or the maker’s relationship to the environment.

Returning home as an adult caused me to think about how things have changed with time. I could not help but feel uneasy at the realization that my mother, aunts, and grandmother all knew how to sew at my age. My mother sewed clothing for my sister and I growing up. Knowing this pushed me to want to improve my skills. It gave me pause to consider the impact on this tradition reflective of how we currently live and find connection in this digital age. One way I did this was making small quilt samples. Magnolia Leaf, Log Cabin Sampler (figure 10) is a small quilt that uses the traditional log cabin quilt block. It required me to spend hours tediously hand stitching magnolia leaves, emblematic of southern femininity, onto the dyed cloth. This helped me develop my sewing skills and learn how a quilt is constructed. The magnolia leaves have faded from brilliant green and have become dull and brittle over time. This quilt balances the desire to preserve this traditional form of feminine expression with a critical contemporary investigation, and it gives form to a tension between preservation and change.

In realizing a goal to establish a wider range of colors using natural dye processes, I created the work Flower of Life, Appliqué Sampler (figure 11). This quilt is made from silk dyed with ethically harvested lichen and mushrooms and wildflowers that were gathered on walks in the Clemson Experimental Forest after I returned to the upstate in autumn. Ethically harvesting lichen implies waiting for the lichen to fall off a tree or rock rather than picking it and ethically harvesting mushrooms implies taking less than half of a flush. To enhance the liveliness of the quilt for the viewer, I sewed these shapes over wire before appliquéing them onto marigold dyed cotton. A sturdy grid to hold the weight of the pieces together in what is traditionally known as a flower of life pattern, a symbol of the cycle of creation. My composition deviates from
convention in the use negative space and asymmetrical balance in its composition, both of which are some of the characteristics of modern quilts. There is an element of tactility present with the irregularity of the petal units and hand stitching that points to the beauty of imperfection found in nature.

During my summer quarantining on the farm, my garden was a place of refuge, learning, and expression. I wanted to tell this part of my story by quilting together layers of impressions within that space. *The Language of Flowers* (figure 12) is a circle, symbolizing time and natural cycles, as well as the literal form of the garden which I planted in concentric circles, like a ripple of flowers. The gold color is dyed from marigold, which references the full sun location of it as well as the warm, healing energy I felt there. The title, *The Language of Flowers*, comes from a Shel Silverstein poem I pasted into my sketchbook in high school called “Forgotten Language,” the first stanza of which reads:

> Once I spoke the language of the flowers,  
> Once I understood each word the caterpillar said,  
> Once I smiled in secret at the gossip of the starlings,  
> And shared a conversation with the housefly  
> in my bed. (Silverstein)

These lines remind me of my childhood as well as the days I spent at home last summer communing with flowers and covered in insects. I tend to forget the flies and mosquitos but remember the butterflies and other pollinators, especially the Aphrodite Fritillary, many of which stayed with me over the time I spent home.

Contained within this work is a series of photographs that use Gum Bichromate printing techniques on fabric. *Gum Bichromate printing* is a form of contact printing that uses potassium dichromate, gum arabic, and watercolor to build layers of color using separate RGB negatives. It exists somewhere between painting and photography, and the images, though derived from color
film, become impressionistic. The gum printed images are faded, painterly representations of the actual flowers, memories made fuzzy with time, embroidered in an attempt to define them. My quilt, *The Language of Flowers*, features embroidered gum bichromate elements and is inspired by alternative photographer, Betty Hahn, in her Gum Bichromate images that incorporate stitching as expressive design elements, further blurring the boundary that previously existed between art and craft media (Anderson 142). An outer layer contains turmeric anthotypes of marigolds from my garden that were pressed in a book and show evidence of their aging, still beautiful but more fragile now. Anthotype printing is one of the most organic image-making processes, using extracts from plants that are exposed for several days or even weeks. This process is non-archival and fades over time when exposed to light. I thought it an appropriate representation of ephemerality given its openness to change by design. This quilt offers visual warmth to a viewer with its warm color and floral imagery, calling upon the flower memories that they might conjure. It is quilted by hand to reference the tactility and sensuality of the action of tending to the garden. The silk is dotted with hundreds of French knots, a visual texture that references the pollen producing anther portion of the flower.

The process of quilting is associated with domestic labor, which was suitable for working remotely from my house in Woodruff, SC. I used film photography to document points in the process of the construction of this quilt, making the pattern and templates and dying the silk that rests in the center of the piece. The photographs are located in my kitchen and studio/dining room, the domestic spaces where most of the pieces in this exhibition were made. They contrast the previous two performative self-portraits in a few ways: indoor vs outdoor, nature vs nature-like, and summer vs winter, showing evidence of the process of constructing the quilts. *Flower Dyeing* (figure 13) depicts the moment that many dyers are familiar with, pulling the fiber from the pot, rinsing and holding it to light to examine the success of the dye. *Pattern Making* (figure
14) depicts the moment where the quilt was still pencil and paper. In this photograph, I am in the process of imagining how the blocks for the quilt would fit together before they exist.

In this chapter, I have discussed how my process begins with direct contact with nature, through activities like gardening or taking walks in the woods. I use natural materials to create ephemeral site markings, dye cloth, and stitch quilt blocks to extract color and texture related to these experiences. Borrowing from traditional quilting and contact printing, I use pattern, color, hand stitching, and photographic imagery to index specific landscapes and flora that communicate my own topophilia for those landscapes. The quilt historically makes reference to domestic and traditionally feminine labors that relate to providing warmth and care. It has also operated as a subversive art form and political tool that transcends perceptions of quilting as purely functional. The following chapter will discuss the contemporary and historic contexts of quilting that relate to the work in my thesis.
CHAPTER THREE
HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY QUILT CONTEXT

The patchwork quilt is perhaps the quintessential American craft. Until very recently, quilts were considered ordinary, everyday bedcovers pieced by women to make worn clothing last longer and provide warmth for their families (Buszek 99). In the 19th century, women were encouraged to garden and study botany to build morality, intellect, and piousness. Gardening and quilting often overlapped for women, both of which were “acceptable” forms of expression for a woman bound to domestic life. Floral quilts from the 1800’s often integrated forms that were inspired by the act of gardening through piecing, chintz, and appliqué techniques (Ducey). I realized I was working within a similar framework, by using the flowers I grew and translating them into textiles I created.

If comparing historic quilts to contemporary quilts, an evolution of the quilt as a means of expression is evident. Amy Meissner’s work addresses the emotional and physical labor of women with her work, Cherry, composed of rows of orifices of bridal satin holding black stones from her home in Alaska and scribbled stitches over “perfect” stitches, she tells the story of the weight that women carry to meet societal standards and the standard of our loved ones. Her work activates the feeling of solastalgia, remorse for a changing climate, by referencing the porosity of melting snow in her subarctic home with these forms and drawing comparison to the emotional holes that accumulate for women as they extend themselves to meet the needs of others (Meissner).

It is important to take a moment to acknowledge the complex and grievous history associated with textiles in the United States. In the 19th century, quilting became accessible in the US as a result of the industrial revolution, when the price of cotton fabric due to the invention of
the cotton gin. While I appreciate the history of American quilts, it is important to remember this progress was built on the backs of slave labor.

Harriet Powers, a former slave who became a seamstress for Mary Todd Lincoln after emancipation, made story quilts that showed a combination of African and Christian symbols as well as representations of celestial events, a uniquely cross continental convergence of style that indexes the oppressive forces that brought about this convergence (Powers). Because racial oppression is still experienced today, we acknowledge that the quilt still functions as a tool to lift up the voices of oppressed groups and counter conditions of obscurity. Chawnee Kimber is a contemporary quilter working with text and improvisational pattern to make political statements related to race and gender. She made The One for Eric G. as a response to the murder of Eric Garner by a police officer in 2014 whose lethal use of a banned chokehold choked him to death for selling loose cigarettes. She pieced the words “I can’t breathe” in white, repeating in rows that slowly break down and turn blue (Allen). As we read these lines, we feel pain for the victims of police brutality and their families. Although these works are very different from my own, I think it is necessary to acknowledge the contemporary and historical politics that are part of the quilt’s historical lineage.

In 1971, Abstract Design in American Quilts marked an important moment in quilt history. Jonathan Holstein and Gail Van der Hoof collected vintage quilts across the US that specifically resembled visual elements found in modern abstract paintings and exhibited them at the Whitney Museum. This is a quote by Nancy Bavor from her MFA thesis on the California Art Quilt Revolution:

“In the context of postmodernism, Abstract Design in American Quilts can be viewed as a transitional exhibition. The exhibit may not have fully contested Greenberg’s notion of pure form, but it did elucidate two important components of postmodernism: the collapsing boundaries between high culture and popular culture; and the blurring distinctions between art and everyday life.” (Bavor 15)
At the time, one criticism however was that of this show was that the exhibit stripped the quilts of their identity and purpose by making people see them like paintings. Why can’t they just be quilts? Who decides what art is or is not? What happens when the quilt is actually designed to hang in a gallery? The comparison of textiles to paintings to be read as Art may have been necessary at the time, but soon after, artists began exploring the autonomy of traditional fiber arts as an art medium in its own right. The Pattern and Decoration artists challenged the notion of high versus low art by using craft materials to make art. Miriam Schapiro created “femmages” that utilized collage, pattern, paper, and cloth to discuss the female experience. Her three-to-four-meter Fans were monumental, radiating and vibrant representations of the traditionally delicate feminine object (Buszek 110). The Language of Flowers shares certain formal and material concerns with Schapiro’s femmage, including radial symmetry, embroidery, and decorative motifs that relate to nature and femininity.

By the late 70’s, the “art quilt” was becoming a recognized art medium—a medium of uncharted territory that (mostly female) artists were beginning to explore and innovate (Bavor 2). Joan Schulze was one of those artists. Her pieces California 1 and 2 show her topophilia for a specific landscape as well as her innovative use of traditional patterns combined with artful piecing and colors that evoke a sense of place (Bavor 75). Landscape and quilting combine to tell a story of place and the relationship of the quilter to that place. We feel the light dappled across the mountains and the outstretched highway taking us far away into that cloth landscape. Schulze’s quilts are examples of what is now referred to as modern traditionalism, using traditional blocks in conjunction with artful techniques.

My art quilts and photographs make reference to my own sense of topophilia. I use strategies that champion eco-responsibility, like the use of natural and ethical dye rather than
synthetic dye and reusing materials rather than discarding them. This, in combination with photographic techniques, like cyanotype, position the work in a particular time and place. The following chapter will discuss a series of cyanotype quilts that uses the site of the Clemson Experimental Forest during fall and winter to communicate my experiences with this place. A viewer who shares a love of forests may find emotional resonance within these works.
It’s a cold November morning in the Clemson Experimental Forest. I arrive before the sun rises with my film camera in a runner’s backpack. I start running with a headlamp through the trees, trying not to stumble on slippery fallen leaves. I can see my breath. Soon dawn breaks, and light pours into the forest and the space between the branches illuminates like stained glass. I see the blue sky, turn off my headlamp, and set up my camera. Cold sunrises in the forest are enchanting displays of light.

Like Schulze and Meisner, I use the quilt as a tool to capture the emotive conditions of the environment. The Clemson Experimental Forest has grown a special place in my heart since starting at Clemson. Coming from a conventional (read: mono cropping) farm, I appreciate that the forest has been converted from overworked farmland into a rich ecosystem. Experimental Forest Quilt (figure 15) was inspired by growth and decay and the relationship that the role of the trees in a forest such as how they drop their leaves that decompose into mulch, provide oxygen, nutrition, and protection for the forest inhabitants. The living systems in the forest weave a unique tapestry, evidence of which can be seen in something as simple as saprophytic fungi on a decaying log and even a single leaf from a tree. Using film photography and cyanotype, I am presenting views from within the forest that layer perspectives seen from within. This process could be done digitally, but I choose film because the black and white negative translates beautifully into cyanotype. Cyanotype uses the UV light of the sun to describe direct contact of nature, suggesting a similar relation that of a quilt to the body. I find comfort in nature and sometimes wish to completely wrap myself inside it. This work is a response to that feeling.
Winter Wind (figure 16) was originally inspired by the feeling of light coming through the trees in Winter. Winter is a time of reflection and rest, and as the leaves fall, we are able to see the spaces they once occupied lines against the sky that move with the wind. This piece is reflective of that space, as well as the negative space created between the leaves which float in a sea of blue, as the waving lines of their lobes form fluid shapes between. I used a few of the varieties of oak trees that were planted to restore that land and now make up much of the structure of the forest. The quilting, or the thread that connects the three layers of the quilt, functions aesthetically as drawn lines that radiate from each shape. This adds movement and texture to the piece, and although it is made with a machine, I used the machine like a drawing tool, so the evidence of the hand is present.

Quilts and photography often evoke repetition and variation within repetition, that can describe actual experiences and memories I have with nature. The blue of the cyanotype and the bareness of the tree evoke the bitter cold of wintertime, when we seek additional layers of protection and comfort. This work is specific to the region of upstate South Carolina. It reframes the common species of trees and fungi familiar to the region into the context of the gallery. Both of these forest cyanotype quilts use under or over exposed or otherwise unusable cyanotype to make the binding, adding a recycled element which is important to the structure of both forests and quilts.

Oak Afghan (figure 16) uses dye materials from the common white oak tree, to crochet a radiating pattern, similar to an afghan blanket, from its central shape, a quilted cyanotype of Issaquena Lake in the shape of a white oak leaf. The oak tree has many useful properties that we tend not to associate with it, including food, weaving material, medicines, and dye. All three forest quilts relate to this feeling of wanting to wrap oneself in a forest, to find comfort and
healing there. The lines made by the quilting process articulate the veins of the leaf over a cyanotype of the landscape from which it grew. The binding curves along the border of the lobe, but the yarn extends beyond the binding.

These three works share the site of the Clemson Experimental Forest which are evidenced through photographic image. The images are collected by walking or running through the forest with a film camera, a process which feels similar the act of foraging dye materials. All three were created during winter, and reference the action of decay and dormancy, which are complimentary to previously discussed works that reference growth, flowering, and summer. Because my process relies heavily on experiences with nature, natural cycles and seasons influence my work. We, being part of the natural world, are affected by cycles of growth and decay. We acknowledge that we are ephemeral beings and accept that change is the only constant. The following chapter breaks away from the quilt to delineate themes of natural cycles using organic materials.
When I moved back to the upstate of South Carolina, I started to look closer at the mushrooms growing in the Experimental Forest, slowly familiarizing myself with some of the native species, some of which are potential dye material. With mushroom dyeing, it is important to practice ethical harvesting, meaning, take only half or less of a flush, and carry them in a basket so they may drop spores. Mushrooms do provide very important roles to their ecosystems. About 80% of plants form mycorrhizal relationships and saprophytic fungi, like the ones typically seen growing on logs, act to rid the world of rubbish by feeding on decaying organic matter.

The mushroom we see is really the sexual organ or fruiting body, but most of the action is happening down below. Mycelium is ecological connective tissue through which most of the world is stitched into relation. Imagine millions of hyphal tips exploring just a tablespoon of soil. Laid end to end, this amount of mycelium could stretch up to ten kilometers. Sprawling, tangled, intelligent networks explore the ground beneath our feet, circulating nutrients and information. These threads hold ecosystems together but mostly go unseen (Merlin Sheldrake).

Mycelial networks are elegant, especially in their emergent stage. By slicing a section from the interior of a mushroom and placing it in a petri dish of sterilized agar, malt extract, and charcoal, the white mycelium is prominent against the black background as it expands radially, hair like and delicate. This is mushroom cloning, which is useful for propagating native edibles or dyers mushrooms. The agar must be sliced and added to grain substrate, colonized, and then added to a bulk substrate before fruiting.

Mycelial Doily (figure 18) is something of a science experiment. It contains petri dishes of living mycelium, snuggly wrapped in crocheted socks, to create extensions of those networks.
The crocheted yarn is dyed with Umbilicaria Mammulata, or rock tripe, a fungus that was ethically harvested and is a lovely dye material and can be eaten in a survival situation. Observing samples from wild oyster mushrooms growing in agar and on grain, I noticed they began as perfectly delicate and radial, but eventually deviated from this pattern to form denser and more complicated networks. I began with a doily pattern for each sample, but built complex, organic networks between while imagining my crochet hook as the hyphal tip of the mycelium, searching for nourishment and suitable mates. Fungi are closer relatives to us than plants, especially with their evolutionary ability to send signals across networks, not dissimilar from the function of the internet.

The purple color of the yarn complements the golden hues in other works and symbolizes the vitality of the mushrooms harvested, as well as the complementary relationship between fungi and plants. It is also important to remember when viewing these works that they come from real mushrooms in the woods, although hermetically sealed from the viewers’ perspective. They are the outcomes of a wintertime foray in the upstate of South Carolina after rain, which locates them in a specific time and place. The use of crocheted, lichen dyed yarn alludes to the woven and supportive mycelium, performing mutualistic services that stitch together and repair ecosystems.

Given my extensive interest in natural dyes, I became curious about the role of the silkworms in silk production and wondered what it would take to raise silkworms domestically. *Bombyx Mori Memento* (figure 19) was my first “flock” that I raised all the way to maturity, which means I let them hatch and mate, unlike how large sericulture farms boil the cocoons with the moths inside. I was interested in manipulating/extend the raw materiality of silk byproduct of the transformation into moths. I dyed their abandoned cocoons with marigold, stretched them out and sewed them onto paper. The moths were attached last, fragile and now deceased, each
with a tangled gold halo of silk surrounding. It is important that the viewer sees and understands that this material comes from the labor of this insect, each thread from the mouth of the silkworm before metamorphosis. Seeing this piece may provoke a broader understanding of the other works in the thesis exhibition that incorporate silk in their design. The viewer therefore asked to consider how we often exercise cognitive dissonance from where our resources come from.

While raising these creatures, I felt a sense of empathy and appreciation for them. They are sweet, funny things that demand attention. Although my research revealed that they have no preference for darkness or lightness, I discovered ironically that the worms always seemed happier in natural sunlight. Their sense perceptions are simple, with their dominant sense being touch. They sense dark and light instead of the detail that we see, but they still could recognize me when I fed them. I was able to look them in the eye after they reached a certain level of maturity. When they hatched, I watched the males flutter dance and follow the females, followed by mating, laying eggs, and dying shortly after. It was interesting to watch their entire life in only a few months, birth to death. That cycle is what originally interested me in the material, and I wanted to make a piece about the individuality of the moths. A single cocoon, unraveled, is a thread between 1,000 and 3,000 feet long. Those threads have been cultivated and woven to fit human needs for over 5,000 years. Moth Dreams (figure 20), shows some of them before hatching, resting on the pieces from the flower of life sampler, which are silk. Moths rest inside, dreaming, transforming. It is a timeless metaphor that enables us to see ourselves similarly, with the hope that our “transformation” over time will be worth the labor spent getting there.

On my birthday this year, my parents sent me flowers in the mail. Touched by this, I decided to print them with turmeric anthotype, an opportunity to examine the beauty and individuality of the petals as patterns. Remember I love you (figure 20) are a series of prints made from the loving gesture of sending flowers but also relate to our own ephemerality as we mark
certain dates that remind us that we are forever aging and changing. Using the sun to produce these prints reminds me that these days are being counted by the revolutions of the earth around the sun. Anthotypes, unless stored in darkness, will fade with the passing of days like us.

Through cultivation and ethical foraging, I collaborate with natural cycles to reveal the beauty of growth and decay using organic photographic and fiber processes. We are connected to these cycles because we are living, organic matter, dependent on other living organisms. Because of this interconnectivity, I maintain efforts in my studio practice that champion sustainable and conservative use of material. This is especially considered when living organisms are my material. I want to show the viewer living mycelium, decaying plant matter, and silk cocoons so that they may consider their own ephemerality and ecologically entangled existence.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Working with natural material, we observe the patterns of structure and cycles within living systems but also reckon with the human urge to impose our own sense of order upon them. Quilting, contact printing, cultivation of flowers, mushrooms, and moths all offer opportunities to consider the relationship between units, and decisions about looseness and rigidity are made throughout. These works are nature-like but not nature. I exercise control, though softly, over nature to create these works. It is a line we must walk in our encounters with nature to determine how much touch is too much.

The goal of my work is to prompt the viewer to consider themselves as part of nature and not apart from it. They may recall quiet encounters with the forest, gazing up at the trees or down at the soil where they were transported from the material world and into the raw beauty of nature. They saw themselves there and were wrapped inside it. They felt a call to more mindful action, a gentler touch. Quilting is to touch lovingly, a metaphor for something that is needed in the strange and unusual conditions of social distancing. It is also a loving labor, meditation of the hand and heart, a desire to cultivate and reclaim a positive relationship to the natural world. The languages of stitching, of flowers and trees, moths and leaves are very quiet, and only heard through moments of stillness.
WORKS CITED


Figure 1: *Mud Puddle 1*

Archival Inkjet Print
Figure 2: *Mud Puddle 2*

Archival Inkjet Print from Negative

14” h x 20” w, 2020
Figure 3: Swamp Lace
Archival Inkjet Print from Negative
14” h x 20” w, 2020
Figure 4: *Silo Solstice*

Archival Inkjet Print

14” h x 20” w, 2020
Figure 5: *Hay Field*

Archival Inkjet Print

14” h x 20” w, 2020
Figure 6: *Swamp Lacing*

Archival Inkjet Print

13” h x 20” w, 2020
Figure 7: Sky Stitching

Archival Inkjet Print

14” h x 20” w, 2020
Figure 8: *Morning Light*

Archival Inkjet Print from Negative

14” h x 20” w, 2020
Figure 9: *Sunset Catcher*

Archival Inkjet Print

20” h x 14” w, 2020
Figure 10: *Magnolia Leaf, Log Cabin Sampler*

Magnolia Leaves, Turmeric Anthotype, Eco Printed Cotton, Marigold Dyed Cotton, Thread, Batting, Hand and Machine Pieced, Machine Quilted

19” h x 19” w x .25”, 2021
Figure 11: *Flower of Life, Applique Sampler*

Silk Dyed from Mushrooms, Lichen, and Wildflowers, Marigold Dyed Cotton, Thread, Wire, Latch hook Canvas

26” h x 37” w x .25” d, 2021
Figure 12: *Language of Flowers*

Marigolds, Marigold Dyed Silk and Cotton, Thread, Batting, Gum Bichromate over Cyanotype on Cotton, Turmeric Anthotypes, Embroidery, Machine Pieced, Hand Quilted

75” h x 75” w x .25”, 2021
Figure 13: *Flower Dyeing*

Archival Inkjet Print from Negative

20” h x 14” w, 2021
Figure 14: *Pattern Making*

Archival Inkjet Print from Negative

20” h x 14” w, 2021
Figure 15: Experimental Forest Quilt

Cyanotype on Cotton, Thread, Batting, Machine Pieced and Quilted

64” h x 37.5” w x .25” d, 2021
Figure 16: Winter Wind

Cyanotype on Cotton, Thread, Batting, Machine Pieced and Quilted

64”h x 44” w x .24” d, 2021
Figure 17: *Oak Afghan*

Cyanotype on Cotton, Thread, Batting, Machine Quilted, Acorn, Oak Bark, and Oak Leaf
Dyed Wool Yarn
54” h x 32” w x 1” d, 2021
Figure 18: Mycelial Doily

Oyster Mushroom Mycelium growing on Agar, Malt Extract, and Activated Charcoal, Petri Dishes, Mycelium Growing on Grain, Oyster Mushrooms, Rock Tripe Dyed Wool Yarn

36” h x 40” w x 2” d, 2021
Figure 19: *Bombyx Mori Memento*

*Bombyx Mori* Silk Moths, Marigold dyed Silk Cocoons, Paper, Thread  
Dimensions variable, 2021
Figure 20: *Moth Dreams*

Archival Inkjet Print from Negative

14” h x 20” w, 2021
Figure 21: *Remember I Love You*

Turmeric Anthotypes

11” h x 14” w each, 2021