

Clemson University

TigerPrints

All Theses

Theses

12-2021

damned ol' dirt

Molly Morningglory

mollymo@g.clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Ceramic Arts Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morningglory, Molly, "damned ol' dirt" (2021). *All Theses*. 3666.

https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/3666

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

Clemson University

TigerPrints

All Theses

Theses

12-2021

damned ol' dirt

Molly Morningglory

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

 Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Ceramic Arts Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

damned ol' dirt

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Molly Morning-glory
December 2021

Accepted by:
Valerie Zimany, Committee Chair
Dr. Beth Lauritis
Todd McDonald

ABSTRACT

damned ol' dirt centers mindfulness and embodiment practices to foster relationships with the self, each other, and the land. These relationships intend to collectively imagine and then build an emotionally and environmentally sustainable and joyful future. My practice foregrounds clay with digital video, photography, and fabric dyeing, recording the imprint of performance. I use my hereditary understanding of clay and fibers, a trained attunement to the natural world, and my background of performance in craft (via demonstration of tactile techniques) to transfer knowledge and skill to the viewer. Through the creation of tableaux and documents of rituals based in materiality, *damned ol' dirt* encourages the viewer to notice rich relationships in life and to use the understanding of self-knowledge to realize their capacity for joy.

DEDICATION

This thesis manuscript and the artwork are dedicated to my partner, Jeremy Poore, who taught me that thrilling moments of great fun often require sacrifice, discomfort, and hard work but are always worth it. Thank you for your hard work, I have so much fun with you.

I also dedicate the artwork to my parents, Maggie and Freeman Jones, who first introduced me to dirt.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the entire visual arts faculty for their guidance and support. Thank you, Rachel Lynn de Cuba, for expanding my perspective on what art is and can be, for your validation and your advice. Thank you, Anderson Wrangle, for your humor, guidance, chill nature, and support. Thank you, Andrea Feeser, for immediately seeing me so thoroughly and meeting me where I am. Thank you, Kelsey Shaffer for your technical expertise and support. Thank you, Josh Rinker from the audio engineer staff at the Brooks Center. Big thank you to Jordan Fowler for loaning your projectors.

Thank you to my committee members, Todd McDonald, Beth Lauritis, and Valerie Zimany. Todd, your friendship, mentorship, and support have been invaluable. Thank you for helping me see the richness of simplicity and for always making time. Beth, thank you for your help writing and thinking. Your enthusiasm and passion are infectious. Thank you to my committee chair and advisor, Valerie, for digging and existing in the trenches with me through the entire process, during extraordinary global circumstances at that. I see how hard you work for us, and I appreciate your leadership, advocacy, and dedication to our success.

Thank you to my fellow graduate students who gave me their time, thoughts, and friendship. I could not have done this without you.

Thank you to the global pandemic for creating circumstances that disrupted 30 years of studio practice and required a creative expansion that could not otherwise have happened with such quickness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS	6
III. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAND.....	11
IV. EMBODIMENT THROUGH MATERIAL ATTUNEMENT.....	15
V. SELF KNOWING.....	18
VI. CONCLUSION.....	24
FIGURES	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	31

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. <i>wind play</i>	3, 7, 8, 9, 10
2. <i>as of yet untitled</i>	3, 11, 16
3. <i>abiquiu arroyo</i>	12, 13, 14
4. <i>13 weeks of bread</i>	15, 16
5. <i>ablutions</i>	3, 18, 21

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

damned ol' dirt centers mindfulness and embodiment practices via documented action in natural spaces and materials to foster relationships with each other, with the land, with our bodies, and with ourselves. These relationships are essential for our ability to build an emotionally and environmentally sustainable and joyful future. Pieces in this art exhibition express the essence of interactions in and my relationship with the land. I use clay with digital video, photography, and fabric dyeing to record the time imprint of performance. Documentation lives on past the ephemeral moment, spanning time and space to connect with the viewer. In noticing and relishing joyful moments, I appreciate the present. Developing a practice of awareness and making time for simple joys aims to generate a nuanced attunement to opportunities for ease in the future. Practice takes time and focus, which I choose to structure with meditation and breathwork. Visually, structure is seen in the use of grids and compositional choices throughout the work. Alongside these structures is ritual, seen in the repetition of body motions and material processes such as pinching, sewing, and fabric dyeing. Through the creation of tableaus and documents of rituals based in materiality, *damned ol' dirt* encourages the viewer to notice rich relationships in life and to use the understanding of self-knowledge to realize their capacity for joy.

In her book *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*, M.C. Richards wrote, “Art creates a bridge between being and embodiment. What are pigments and gestures, the ephemera of painting? Surely when we look at a painting, we are not seeing the paint

merely. We are seeing something that is not there visibly, but which enters our perception through the eye. Paintings fade, peel, dirty, tear, rot. Pots break. Art in its material aspects is as impermanent as breath.”¹ I see the bridge mentioned as actions we take, both the physical action of making art and the intellectual/emotional action of experiencing art. All of which builds relationships between people and materials. In the case of *damned ol’ dirt*, clay, fabric, charcoal, and dye goods, are primarily sourced from nature.

Clay is a metaphor for the body in the studio and creation stories across cultures worldwide. Ceramicists use the term clay bodies to distinguish between our materials. These bodies come in all different colors and textures and have different traits and uses. In the ceramic studio, we refer to the parts of a clay vessel with bodily terms: mouth, lip, neck, shoulder, belly, foot. Marks my fingers leave on pinch pots build a connection between myself and the viewer when seen or, better yet, touched. Clay creates a connection with the land as clay is land.

Fabric is used to protect our bodies, and garments represent our bodily presence. Investing clay in fibers is another gesture of connection between land and body. There is a cycle of metaphor between these elements. Clay and fabric reference the body, and the body will go back to nature. Moments I depict have a sense of joy or awe, a drop of time and space out of everyday distractions that brings me back to a centered sense of myself. I want to gift the viewer with gentle fascination.

¹ Richards, Mary Caroline. *By Mary Caroline Richards - Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person. 2d Ed.*, (University Press Of New England, 2000), 43

My background in craft processes, production pottery, demonstrations at fairs, and teaching these highly tactile skills influences my desire to show how I build rituals and practice embodiment and mindfulness. This method of skill-sharing is summed up by Tanya Harrod in the introduction to *Craft* when she writes,

“One reason craft has been marginalized in cultural discourse is that craft and making activities are difficult to verbalize. Explicit, written knowledge has obvious value, not least in art practice. But craft is dependent on knowledge tacit, practical, or embodied, learned from watching other people practicing a skill. What the philosopher Michael Oakeshott has called practical knowledge ‘Can neither be taught or learned, only imparted and acquired’ and only ‘acquired by contact with one who is perpetually practicing it.’”²

I hope that these demonstrations will encourage viewers to explore their relationships and find ways to ritualize or recognize joy in their everyday lives. My pairing of craft processes with digital media creates an access point for viewers used to video. Video catches the eye and is familiar, then the viewer becomes aware of craft-based items and techniques. This elevates the viewers understanding of the value of craft-based skills.

Video projections are a method of demonstration and connection building. Ephemeral actions I take in ritual and in nature are documented with video to preserve the experience. Projected in tandem with time-based objects and material records of my interactions creates tableaux for the viewer to witness, such as in *ablutions*, and to actively participate in, such as with *wind play* and *as of yet untitled*. Light is as intangible and evanescent as memory, referencing the passage of time between action and gallery presentation. When the viewer steps between the projection and the residual object, their

² Harrod, Tanya. *Craft*, (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 2018), 15

shadow casts into the tableaux, offering a moment of choice for the viewer to engage with the work, creating a singular, unique, and momentary work of art.

The multifaceted lens I come to this work with is not only tinted with mindfulness practices and attention to materiality. Add to this a childhood spent in the woods logging firewood, learning to track animals (but not hunt them) and learning which plants are edible and which are poisonous. I was taught to read the forest. This relationship with nature is one I cherish deeply and is an attunement and respect that points to my valuing a sustainable future. With this work, I hope to transmit these values to others. My reverence for clay and land is based on the spiritual animism I was raised with from my Cherokee godfather. The elements, materials, and creatures around us are family relatives to be honored and respected rather than resources to be extracted. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes,

“...the language of animacy teeters on extinction—not just for Native peoples, but for everyone. Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion—until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a who, but an it, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying it makes a living land into “natural resources.” If a maple is an it, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a her, we think twice.”³

This example shows the importance of relationships, particularly with the land, for building a sustainable future. In this exhibition my relationship with nature is seen in the respectful use of sustainable processes and foraged materials as well as exultant rituals.

³ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass Indigenous Wisdom Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Paperback 23 April 2020, (Generic, 2020), 57

Desire for and necessity of rich and nourishing relationships became undeniable in March 2020 as we were globally put on lockdown for Covid-19. Concerns for sustainability, environmental and emotional, quickly became dominant in a global conversation. As the intersections of racial equity, housing crises, access to health services, climate change, labor rights, and more became highlighted, I searched for a place to begin. How can I, in my singularity, address these monumental issues that are so bound together it is seemingly impossible to detangle? The emotional weight of it all can be crushing. Lessons from adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism* reveal that deep relationships and cultivating joy are blocks for building a robust and sustainable foundation from which to take action. These artworks are a beginning rather than a conclusion. How do I address global distress? I do not know the answer, but I can prepare myself through tactile mindfulness practices based in materiality. From these ritualized practices, I aim to create a network of relationships through art making and viewing that collaboratively envision a future we want to see so we have something to work towards.

CHAPTER TWO

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

We build our understanding of community, society, and culture based on relationships we have with each other, personal, romantic, professional, platonic, familial, even how we treat those we do not know. Each microcosm of interaction in the home, office, or grocery store works to build, change, or destroy our day-to-day realities. The reciprocity we bring to these interactions reflect back to us. If we want to see a world of kindness and generosity, emotional and environmental sustainability, we must be kind, generous, and graceful with people and nature. Personal accountability for the world we live in empowers the individual to create the world they want to see. This grandiose perspective is within reach, seen in the choices we make every present moment. Mindfulness and self-awareness are keys to generating positive interpersonal relationships. The present actions we take will grow and emerge day by day into a whole life. This concept is called emergence. adrienne maree brown developed this concept and built a framework for structuring it called *Emergent Strategy*. In her book of the same name, she writes, “Emergence emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind.”⁴ Her strategies range from storied examples and metaphors to direct action points; all the information is based in observations of nature. Communication systems of murmuration, growth through repetition seen in fractals, and other mimesis exemplify resilient and

⁴ brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, (Reprint, AK Press, 2017), 3

attuned relationships. "...I began to realize how important emergent strategy, strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions, is to me – the potential scale of transformation that could come from movements intentionally practicing this adaptive, relational way of being, on our own and with others."⁵ This body of artwork facilitates relationship building through interactions with nature and natural materials. It is my hope that in witnessing and interacting with my work, viewers will begin to see their agency in creating our collective reality.

wind play is action dyed with naturally present clay found in a tree fell, charcoal from a still-standing burnt tree, dirt from an unpaved road, and lake water. The marks on the fabric are results of the interaction between body and land, with fabric being the documenting canvas archiving the data of ritualized action. I chose cotton for its ability to capture delicate marks and withstand rough treatment. It is highly absorbent, making it an excellent choice for experimental dyeing, and its translucent quality creates a double-sided projection screen.

Dark tan washes crossing the composition record the road's fine silt, more powdered rock and soil than clay. The overall ecru undertone of the piece is from the unbleached cotton; however, it is a darker shade than natural cotton right off the skein. The light pigment soup composed of the land slightly tints the overall color pallet, whisking away the marks of present action and offering a misty memory of ephemeral moments.

⁵ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 2

The sheet is hung between two dogwood trees in the video, much as it is suspended in the gallery. The moment captured is a combination of recognizing opportunities, an ineffable knowing of nature and the elements. As I played with my shadow, Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* series mingled in my mind. In the book *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Julia Bryan-Wilson writes, "One cannot locate Mendieta's works, or think of them as autonomous objects, because the works seldom reside in a single form, but live somewhere between acts and forms. This is particularly the case with the *Silueta* series, where each *Silueta* is the relation of a performance, a sculpture and a photograph or a film."⁶ *wind play* deploys Mendieta's compositional techniques of overlaying action (my performance and the viewers participation) with artifact (dirt drawing) and documentation (video projection). Using my shadow, and the viewers, to interact with the video representations of nature, and with the natural materials of the projection screen, builds a layering of interpersonal relationships. Setting up conditions for the viewer to contribute to the final composition of the work hopefully helps the viewer become aware of their agency within relationships.

When the viewer walks around the work, bodies push the air, and air pushes the fabric, causing it to gently flutter. Subtler than in the video, this motion acts in tribute or memory to the original action between artist and air. Artist, nature, material, and viewer pass through time and space to interact and create connection. These delicate details combine to build a rich narrative of a simple and essential noticing. adreinne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* describes a practice of relationship building modeled after

⁶ Bryan-Wilson, Julia, et al. *Ana Mendieta: Traces*. (N, Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2014), 24

close observations of ecosystems. “In the same way that complex systems evolve in nature through simple interactions, we can build the futures that we want to see through simple interactions too.”⁷ An important component of *wind play* is the viewer’s shadow. The video projection is angled low enough that as the viewer/participant walks around the piece, their shadow is cast onto the cotton cloth, mingling with mine. The audience becomes a dancer in this collage of shadows.

Digital video projection carries a tactility unique from physical mediums such as clay and fabric, existing with a liminal quality of between states. It is presenting documentation of an action from the past while the projected light exists in the present. This present moment projection of light is used to engage the viewer’s participation in the artworks via their shadow. As the viewer/participant/dancer interacts with the tableaux their body interrupts the flow of casting light waves and change the operation of the work from witnessing the past to creating a present. It is my hope that the viewer’s interaction with their shadow and the landscape, or their shadow and mine, will result in their imaginings of future worlds where they themselves are in nature or we together are working to build an experience. In these musing of future interactions is the same potential contained in the pinch pots, which I go into detail about on page 12.

In the video, I lifted my arms in exultation for the gifts of a strong body, of warm sun and cool breeze on my back, then moved my hands forward in concert with a gust of wind. The energy of the moment brushed the fabric away from my fingertips, and the

⁷ brown, adrienne maree. “Field Notes for a Revolution.” instagram. @badactivistcollective, September 3, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTXRZpUv6qF/>.

wind took center stage in our dance by lifting the cotton curtain. Captured by digital video, the action lives on past the ephemeral moment to reside here for the viewer to witness and decide where their relationship lies and how they want to contribute to the work. Identities of the participants influence the composition and content of the resulting moment. *wind play* creates a set of conditions that anonymously invites viewers of any identity to join me, opening access to a relationship with nature, and myself, in an optimistic gesture of co-creating an inclusive future.⁸

⁸ Ana Mendieta's work operates with traces or camouflages of her figure, acknowledging the history of objectified female bodies in art while subverting the historical mode of pleased presentation. The postures are not seductive, they are strong or neutral. Being a shadow, the figure in *wind play* is similarly anonymous, taking on a choreography of gentle strength. My reference of Mendieta goes beyond formal art affinities to her resistance to being categorized. Mendieta rejected being labeled a feminist artist, leaving the collective she was a founding member of, due to the lack of nuance and intersectionality of the movement's objectives and language. I feel similarly opposed to describing the shadow in *wind play* as female-bodied, or a woman's shadow, as this reduces identity to residing in the body. While I cannot escape social prescriptions tied to how my particular body is read, the purpose of this work is to be inclusive and inviting rather than a presentation of gender.

CHAPTER THREE

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAND

Each video in *damned ol' dirt* is looped. This continuation speaks to the repetition needed in skill development and ritualized actions. Practice makes better, and practice requires repetition. Combining the lessons learned from *Craft* and *Emergent Strategy* and from active relationship with nature, fractals repeat themselves in growth; what you pay attention to grows. Repetition of form seen in multitudes of pinch pots laid out in the beginning curve of a spiral on the floor in *as of yet untitled* emphasizes this perspective.

The video is a short, looped clip of a landscape predominantly featuring a field of red clay. A slight movement in the video calls attention to the trees, other greenery, and a distant mountain vista. The movement also indicates the presence of a person holding the camera. The camera was held at chest level, the perspective casting from my heart. The sound of rhythmic, deep breathing occasionally coordinating with the movement in the video exemplifies the power of mindful breath to transform ourselves and our perspectives. Embodiment of the work for the viewer is present in the need to be aware of where they are stepping and choosing whether to pick up the pots. The viewer may also find themselves unconsciously matching their breath to the video, which is projected onto a wall large enough to feel encompassing. At an angle that casts the viewer's shadow onto the landscape, the viewer could metaphorically step into the scene. The pinch pot arrangement continues the ground from the video, moving from wall to floor, connecting the moment and place in the video to the present time in the gallery. As I arranged the pots to indicate to the viewer where I would like them to stand, the resulting collection of

multiples created a murmuration of sorts that resembles the swirl in a fingerprint, furthering the connection individual, body, and land.

Each pinch pot is individually hand-made with a quality of practiced mindfulness, aware but not occupied: active, focused, relaxed. Repetition and skill allow the process to simply happen, similar to the way mindful breath turns into automatic breathing. Each pot is unique, yet they all hold similarities in size and texture. The form features my fingermarks and fingerprints, rhythmic indentions, and peaks around the circumference evidence my unique influence and presence. Seemingly empty, the pinch pots carry potential. The void is a space of waiting and readiness, hopeful for the future and what it may come to hold. They are vessels as our bodies are vessels. They contain air as we contain breath. Similarities continue with the cupping of a hand; we can mold our bodies into their shape, as I shaped them with my body. This layering of one-to-one relationships builds a direct connection between our bodies and the land, as clay is from the land.

Five photographs document tactile decisions three different people made while interacting with the pinch pots. Their inclusion in the piece refers to Michael Oakeshott's assertion that practical, tactile knowledge can only be acquired through tacit demonstration. Hung in an undulating line, the photographic prints create a sense of rhythm in key with patterned fingermarks on the pots. If viewers choose to engage physically with the pots, they are rewarded with a tactile journey through time that builds a relationship between us.

Continuing the research of land and body relationships, *abiquiu arroyo* is a sculpture of a landscape in New Mexico. Comprised of strips of dirt dyed cotton and silk,

sewn together in horizontal lengths, the aesthetics reference minimalist paintings such as Agnes Martin's. "*Untitled #3*, painted in bands of low-saturated chalky color, evokes the arid climate and abundant sunshine of New Mexico... Within the grid, she (Martin) reasserted the primacy of subject matter in an abstract form that conveyed happiness, solitude, perfection, and the transcendent potential of art."⁹ Martin's works are known for their gentle embodied pencil marks, the details and variations of which require an eye attuned to material nuance and a body practiced in making much as my work creates a connection between body and land via process and material. Our shared use of low contrast horizontal bands of color emphasizes the aesthetics of the Southwest landscape. The colors used in *abiquiu arroyo* are actual remnants of the land's pigment, and reducing the visual information creates a spaciousness, simplicity, and beauty that documents my experience of the area.

With the help of local potters familiar with the region, I collected different colored dirts ranging from yellow sandstone to maroon clay to black shale and saturated the fabric in baths to explore their material and pigment qualities. When I returned home, I used gold metallic thread to sew the pieces together to reference the glittering beauty of micaceous clay in the region whose color, texture, and effect did not take to the fabric. The uneven and different ways the fabric took the pigments emulates textures in the landscape and again refers to the subtle and evanescent quality Martin's *Untitled #3*. My use of torn rather than cut fabric relate to the rugged, unyielding desert, giving a sense of

⁹ As seen in the wall placard at the High Museum, Atlanta, GA. Anne Cox Chambers Wing, Skyway, Gallery 422, Accession # 1995.86

incompletion and potential resolution. The linear quality of the piece represents the layers of colorful strata that build the mountains.

In contrast to the lush southeastern landscapes so saturated with humidity and rain that the ground is in a constant state of reconstitution, the mountains of the Southwest stand tall and dry, defying gravity. A wildfire raged in the area while exploring the arroyo. The vibrant, multicolored landscape was tinged a light pastel amber from the smokey pollution. The ethereal quality of the pastel pigments and the use of translucent silk chiffon brings elements of air and fire to the work, while opaque cotton muslin contains more clay and grounds the work firmly in the land. Alternating fabric materials reference the layering of smoke and land while looking up at the striped mountainsides where the clay was collected. Securely yet tenuously suspended from the wall with magnets, *abiquiu arroyo* accentuates the verticality, lift, and lightness unique to the Southwestern landscape.

Throughout the process, each strip of dirt-dyed fabric became precious to me, and instead of trimming or altering the shape of the strips, I chose to leave the excess edges in the composition to communicate the value of labor and material. Inconsistent edges also operate to distinguish it from the traditional rectangular frame of painting, further highlighting the materiality and tactility of fabric. Standing at a scale that envelopes the viewer when they inspect the details mentioned above, the fabric piecing and stitching recall the language of quilt making, heightening the sense of envelopment and connection, creating an intimacy with the landscape. We can find embodiment through making with, and in viewing, ritualized actions inherent in craft processes.

CHAPTER FOUR

EMBODIMENT THROUGH MATERIAL ATTUNEMENT

In 1965 Anni Albers wrote an article titled *Tactile Sensibility*, where she discusses the proliferation of reading, writing, and all forms of progress as coupled with regression of tactile sensitivity.

“No wonder a faculty that is so largely unemployed in our daily plotting and bustling is degenerating. Our materials come to us already ground and chipped and crushed and powdered and mixed and sliced so that only the finale in the long sequence of operations from matter to product is left to us: we merely toast the bread. No need to get our hand into the dough. No need-alas, also little chance-to handle materials, to test their consistency, their density, their lightness, their smoothness.” She goes on to write, “We touch things to assure ourselves of reality. We touch the objects of our love. We touch the things we form. Our tactile experiences are elemental. If we reduce their range, as we do when we reduce the necessity to form things ourselves, we grow lopsided. We are apt today to overcharge our gray matter with words and pictures, that is, with materials already transposed into a certain key, pre-formulated material, and to fall short in providing for a stimulus that may touch off our creative impulse, such as unformed material, material in the rough.”

Eighteen months ago, at the beginning of quarantine, I cultivated yeast to build a sourdough starter and have kept it alive, feeding it and baking with it every week or so. This ritual was begun during a time of intense and unprecedented uncertainty in our lives and continues to bring my family a sense of care and preparedness that is as nourishing as the protein-rich sourdough itself. *13 weeks of bread* is a collection of used parchment papers from underneath bread I baked using my sourdough starter.

Marks on the parchment paper are the imprint of the baking process. I made the bread, and the bread left its residue of growth and transformation on the paper. The grid

presentation reflects this sequential ritual of tending and care. Using parchment papers usually discarded refers to the importance of mindful and present attention to simple joy. The prints each loaf creates resemble tree rings and fingerprints, again displaying the relationship between us and nature. This connection can be a healthy and abundant friendship or an absent and distant thing, but the relationship exists regardless.

Much like clay, bread is a metaphor for the body in creation stories. The alchemical transformation in baking, dyeing fabric, and firing clay relate to the personal transformations that can happen in mindfulness practices, the ever-changing qualities of our relationships, and the geological alchemy that transforms granite into clay over millennia. Another connection point between *13 weeks of bread* and *as of yet untitled* is the grid composition. Both represent ritual and structure the passing of time. The grid form of the pinch pots is organized into a slight wave or semi-spiral referencing a fingerprint and a murmuration, displaying body/land connection, and connecting to the prints left by bread loaves.

I chose to brush fire the pinch pots with my parents. Burning brush is a regular part of their land management that we used as an opportunity to reinforce our bond as a family, turning labor and chore into joyful family time. As we are a family of potters, we would usually fire sculptures or “burn dirt” along with clearing the land. Brush firing is a low-temperature process used primarily for aesthetic rather than functional purposes; the coloration and effects are representative of the variations in the landscape. The pots were spread out across the field much as they are in the gallery space. Coals were slowly transported closer and then on top of the pieces, and brush was piled on the fire for

several hours. This process is labor-intensive and generates a container of time that fosters storytelling and relationship building. The energy, labor, and love generated while firing the pots is present for the viewer to engage with, metaphysically transferring to them as they witness and interact with the pots.

CHAPTER FIVE

SELF KNOWING

ablutions is perhaps the most personally narrative work in this thesis and showcases my self-identity, relationship with the land, and reverence and rejection of the Southeast's culture. The hand-made dress worn in the video is hung above and behind the projection as if the garment stood up from the action. The positioning of these elements gives a vicarious memory of the initial ritual. With its simple pattern and shroud-like quality, the gown's cut is a nod to the aesthetics of both Quakerism and Baptist fundamentalism. The former I was raised as; the latter is an inescapable influence of regional culture.

Projected onto a puddle of locally dug clay slip on the floor, the video shows me repeatedly rubbing my face across a disintegrated basin I made with raw clay. My hair and dress are caked in the ochre-colored earth. James Melchert's *Changes* beautifully explores mindfulness via embodiment with raw clay. Initially performed in 1972 with multiple iterations, the most recent was completed in 2010 at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. The repetition of the performance, even with decades between, reinforces the practice of mindfulness. Melchert states, "I like words that start with re: rethink, revisit, reassess, reenter. I think that's how our minds work – we keep circling the same issues, but with increasing clarity and depth."¹⁰ Practicing mindfulness is developing a relationship with the self. Repetition shown in the work reflects this quality

¹⁰ Porges, Maria, "Mending 3: Jim Melchert", Porges, December 26, 2019, accessed September 4th 2021, <https://wordsaboutart.com/blog/http/wordsaboutartcom/blog-page-url/2018/9/28/new-post-title-2>

of practicing relationships. Rubbing my body in clay is a way for me to attune to the natural world. Physically melding the materiality of mud with my body metaphysically grounds me to nature and enriches my relationship with the land. Displaying my practice uses the previously referenced history of craft demonstration to give the viewer access and permission to invest themselves in materials in a way they may not have considered valuable before.

Projecting the video onto the floor gives the viewer a sense of being present for the action. The perspective is as it could have been, bridging time and drawing them into the experience. Using wet clay as the backdrop for the video saturates the image, adds the smell of wet earth to the space, and is a metaphor for the support we are given by the dirt we stand on. As time passes during the exhibition, the wet clay slip dries and cracks, adding action and real-time materiality. The video quality becomes paler as the clay color changes from deep liquid red to dusty dry orange. Cracks in the clay add to the texture of the video and mirror the cracks in the basin. Much of Janine Antoni's work shares these interests in repetition and investment of the body with material as seen in *Loving Care* and *Eureka*. While she often goes to physical extremes, and my work is rooted in a gentler pleasure, there is a dialogue of body, mind, and material in both our work. Perhaps a closer comparison can be found with Nam Jun Paik's *Zen For Head*. The gestures and performance are as important as the resulting document on the garment and my body. Paik is not a Zen practitioner as I am not a Baptist. We both reacted to these spiritual influences as artists responding to cultural input and the resulting works are documents of our specific lens and time period.

As depicted by my smile in the video, I joyfully and repeatedly washed my face and hair in the deep red clay of my region. The garment stands as evidence of the extent of my total body immersion with clay and represents my body. Materials repeat from ground to garment. Clay on the gallery floor is the same clay in the video projected onto it which was sourced from the region the video was shot in and is the clay that remains on the dress. This integration and layering of earth/body/garment/action express human integration with the land and nature. Furthering this relationship, the actions disintegrated the basin, melded my body and material, and pressed the clay back into the land. Belinda Blignaut is an artist working in performance, raw clay, and ephemerality in South Africa. She shares a similar childhood of rural exploration, attunement to nature, and interest in relationships cultivated with materiality. In speaking about her total body investment in raw clay, she said, “I feel if we have a connection with the earth, we’ll learn to understand and care for it better. We’ll also learn to understand one another and care for one another better.” She says about her work *Mud Rites*,

“Rites mark transitions—the passage between one status and another. Rites speak of a non-separation between the I and all others in existence. This piece is done with a purpose. A personal meditative ritual seeking an inner shift in both myself and, now that I’m doing it in public, in other people. Both art and rites enable us to express intuition in a physical and tangible way. Placing my body into the work speaks of psychological transformation. A continual return. Both a dying and a rebirthing.”¹¹

¹¹ Belinda Blignaut speaking about her work, minutes 5:32-5:40. #4 *Belinda Blignaut & Casey Whittier Discuss Environmental Advocacy & Greening Ceramics*. Dr. Wendy Gers, 2021. ceramicscoach.com/blog/4-belinda-blignaut-casey-whittier-discuss-environmental-advocacy.

Blignaut talks about the psychological transformation she finds with material meditation, and I see an additional spiritual element. MC Richards, adrienne maree brown, Jim Melchert, Robin Kimmemer, all write from a metaphysical or spiritual perspective, and I add to that my unique background as a Quaker with Cherokee influence raised in a region steeped in the cultural language of Baptist Evangelism. In *ablutions*, I point to the overlaps and contradictions in material affinity and the spirit.

Rather than buy a premade gown, I hand-made the garment to have control over the aesthetic elements. In reference to Quakerism, I chose a pragmatic pattern with oversized pockets and a drawstring waist that points to the tenant of Simplicity¹². Cotton muslin is soft and light across the body. Slip is cool, silky, slippery, and holds the rusty, rich scent of earth. The cultural imagery of river baptisms performed in long white gowns that cling to the body when wet and stained with red clay and river water can be found in movies like *O' Brother Where Art Thou*. As I rub my face across the cool clay, a gentle smile expressing the pleasure of clay's silky slick caress creating a new skin, my body and the white dress are covered, stained, and dyed with the deep ochre pigment of the landscape. In Gillian Welch's song *Red Clay Halo*, she describes the agrarian protagonist's struggle and acceptance with red clay's symbolic socio-economic and spiritual tarnishing.

¹² One of the major testimonies of Friends, it [Simplicity] means living without extravagance. Sincerity and honesty at the heart and center of the person. Simplicity is maintained as a testimony by Friends and evidenced in many ways: dress, manner of worship, decoration of meetinghouses, clarity of spirit in all relationships in order that a person may give time and money to the most meaningful things. "Glossary." Quaker.org. Friends Publishing Corporation, June 15, 2020. <https://quaker.org/glossary/>.

Red Clay Halo

All the girls all dance with the boys from the city
And they don't care to dance with me
Now it ain't my fault that the fields are muddy
And the red clay stains my feet

And it's under my nails and it's under my collar
And it shows on my Sunday clothes
I do my best with the soap and the water
But the damned old dirt won't go

But when I pass through the pearly gate
Will my gown be gold instead?
Or just a red clay robe with red clay wings
And a red clay halo for my head?

Now it's mud in the spring, and it's dust in the summer
When it blows in a crimson tide
Until trees and leaves and the cows are the color
Of the dirt on the mountainside

But when I pass through the pearly gate
Will my gown be gold instead?
Or just a red clay robe with red clay wings
And a red clay halo for my head?

Now Jordan's banks they're red and muddy
And the rolling water is wide
But I got no boat, so I'll be good and muddy
When I get to the other side

And when I pass through the pearly gate
Will my gown be gold instead?
Or just a red clay robe with red clay wings
And a red clay halo for my head?

I'll take the red clay robe with the red clay wings
And a red clay halo for my head¹³

¹³ Gillian Welch, "Red Clay Halo", track 4 on *Time (The Revelator)*, Acony, 2001

At the end of the song, our protagonist claims the material as a marker of their identity, no longer “damned old dirt” but their self-chosen adornment for entering heaven. Rituals, reclamation, and rites are all acts that require attention, intention, and practice.

Rhythmically pinching pots, ritually bathing in dirt, the slow ritual of baking bread all speak of personal power, connection to land, interpersonal relations, and hope for the future.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The knowledge and lessons I learn from a life with clay as my companion are ones that ground me in my identity and bring me to the home that is myself. Using a hereditary understanding of clay and fibers, a trained attunement to the natural world, and my background of performance in craft to transfer knowledge and skill, *damned ol' dirt* encourages the viewer to notice their own rich relationships in this life and to use the understanding that comes from self-knowing to imagine, notice, and realize the joy of which they are capable. I see a joyful and sustainable future when activating and practicing my relationships with the people around me, nature, my body, and myself. My process utilizes *Emergent Strategy's* attention to natural systems of relationship modeling to develop a visual language of self-reflection, collective care, and future building.

Tactility of materials plays a big part in the making and content of this body of work. I have written about the pleasures of mud, the metaphors of bread, the physical and metaphysical transformations of engaging with ceramics, the delicate language of fabric, and the liminal quality of video projection. Tactile understanding of our reality grows increasingly rare and vitally important. The lopsided quality Annie Albers writes about is one of exiting the body and residing in the mind primarily. Reduction of physicality rejects the bridge between us. Our bodies are the connective tissue between each other and our surroundings. Lopsidedness is seen in the commodification and extraction of our resources to the detriment of our physical survival. It was seen in the isolation and solitude felt during the extremes of digital life during covid quarantine and is imbalance

younger generations are contending with as their social lives are increasingly lived online to the sacrifice of their confidence and autonomy, as well as antithetical to our biological drives. Embodiment through materiality is a path to balancing these lopsided results of rejected tactility.

Operating through visual and participatory engagement, these works use my hereditary understanding of clay and fibers, trained attunement to the natural world, and my background of performance in craft (via demonstration of tactile techniques) to transfer knowledge and skill to the viewer. Through the engagement of mindfulness practices with natural materials, seen in tactile, embodied, repetitive actions, and craft processes, *damned ol' dirt* encourages viewers to examine their relationships with their community, the nature world, their physicality, and their selves towards the goal of imagining and creating a sustainable and joyful future.

FIGURES



Figure 1: *wind play*
cotton muslin, foraged and found dye goods, video projection, dimensions variable,
duration looped, 2020



Figure 2: *as of yet untitled*
ceramics, photography, video projection, dimensions variable, duration looped, 2021



Figure 3: *abiquiu arroyo*
cotton muslin, silk chiffon, collected dirt dye goods, gold thread, 91"x72"x4.5", 2021

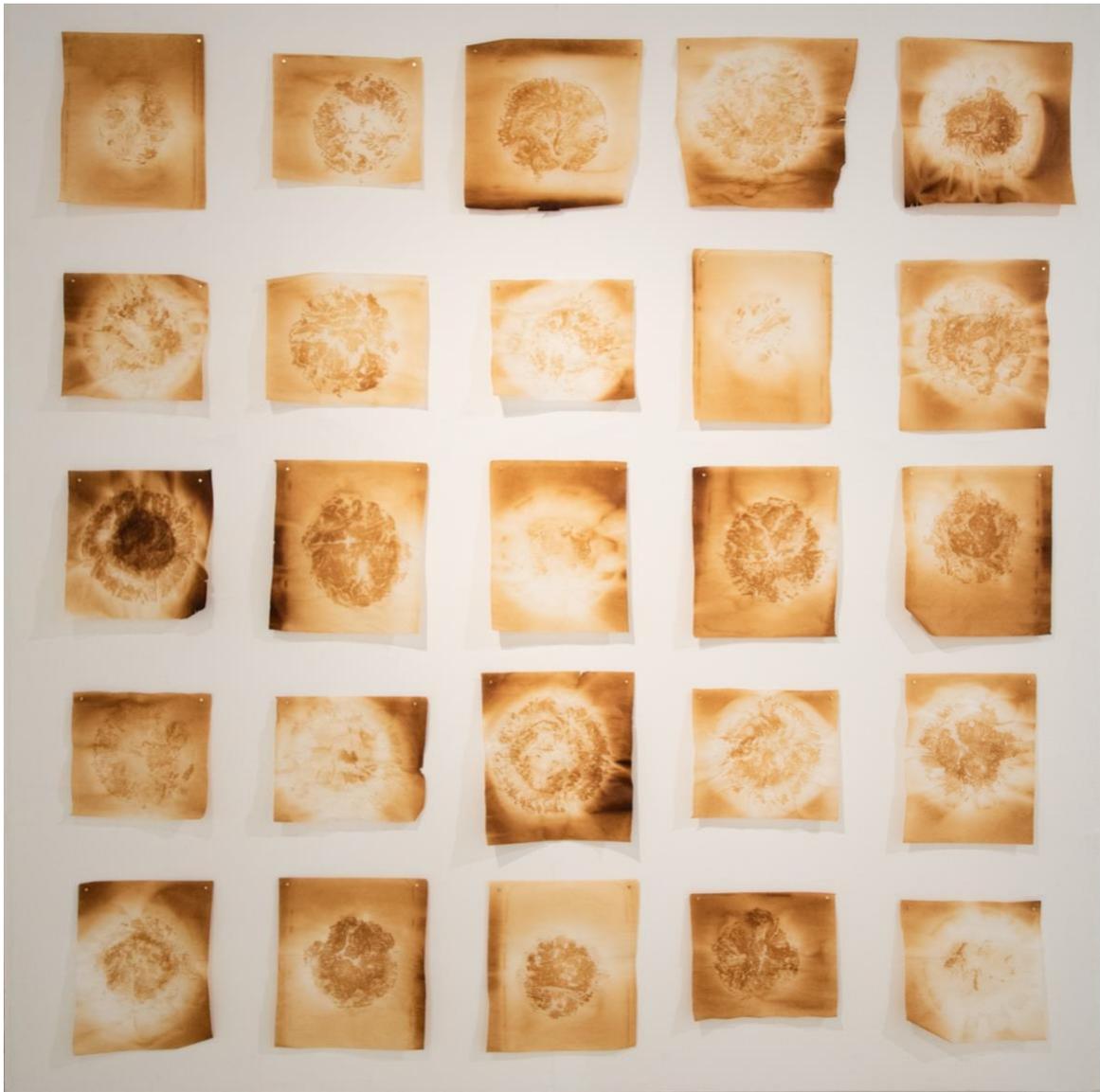


Figure 4: *13 weeks of bread*
parchment paper scorched and printed by sourdough bread, 96"x96"x4", 2021



Figure 5: *ablutions*
hand sewn cotton muslin dress, raw wild clay, video projection, 70"x43"x43",
duration looped, 2021

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Belinda Blignaut & Casey Whittier Discuss Environmental Advocacy & Greening Ceramics. Dr. Wendy Gers, 2021. <https://www.ceramicscoach.com/blog/4-belinda-blignaut-casey-whittier-discuss-environmental-advocacy>.

brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, (Reprint, AK Press, 2017)

brown, adrienne maree. “Field Notes for a Revolution.” instagram. @badactivistcollective, September 3, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTXRZpUv6qF/>.

brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, (Later Printing, Chico, Edinburgh, AK Press, 2019)

“Glossary.” Quaker.org. Friends Publishing Corporation, June 15, 2020. <https://quaker.org/glossary/>.

Harrod, Tanya. *Craft*, (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 2018), 15

High Museum, Atlanta, GA. Anne Cox Chambers Wing, Skyway, Gallery 422, Accession # 1995.86

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass Indigenous Wisdom Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants Paperback 23 April 2020*. (Generic, 2020), 57

Porges, Maria, “Mending 3: Jim Melchert”, Porges, December 26, 2019, accessed September 4th 2021, <https://wordsaboutart.com/blog/http/wordsaboutartcom/blog-page-url/2018/9/28/new-post-title-2>

Richards, Mary Caroline. *By Mary Caroline Richards - Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person. 2d Ed.*, (University Press Of New England, 2000), 43

Welch, Gillian. “Red Clay Halo”, track 4 on *Time (The Revelator)*, Acony, 2001