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Grounded

by

Rachelle G. Cooper

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Rachelle G. Cooper find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Grounded

Thesis Abstract----Idaho State University (2021)

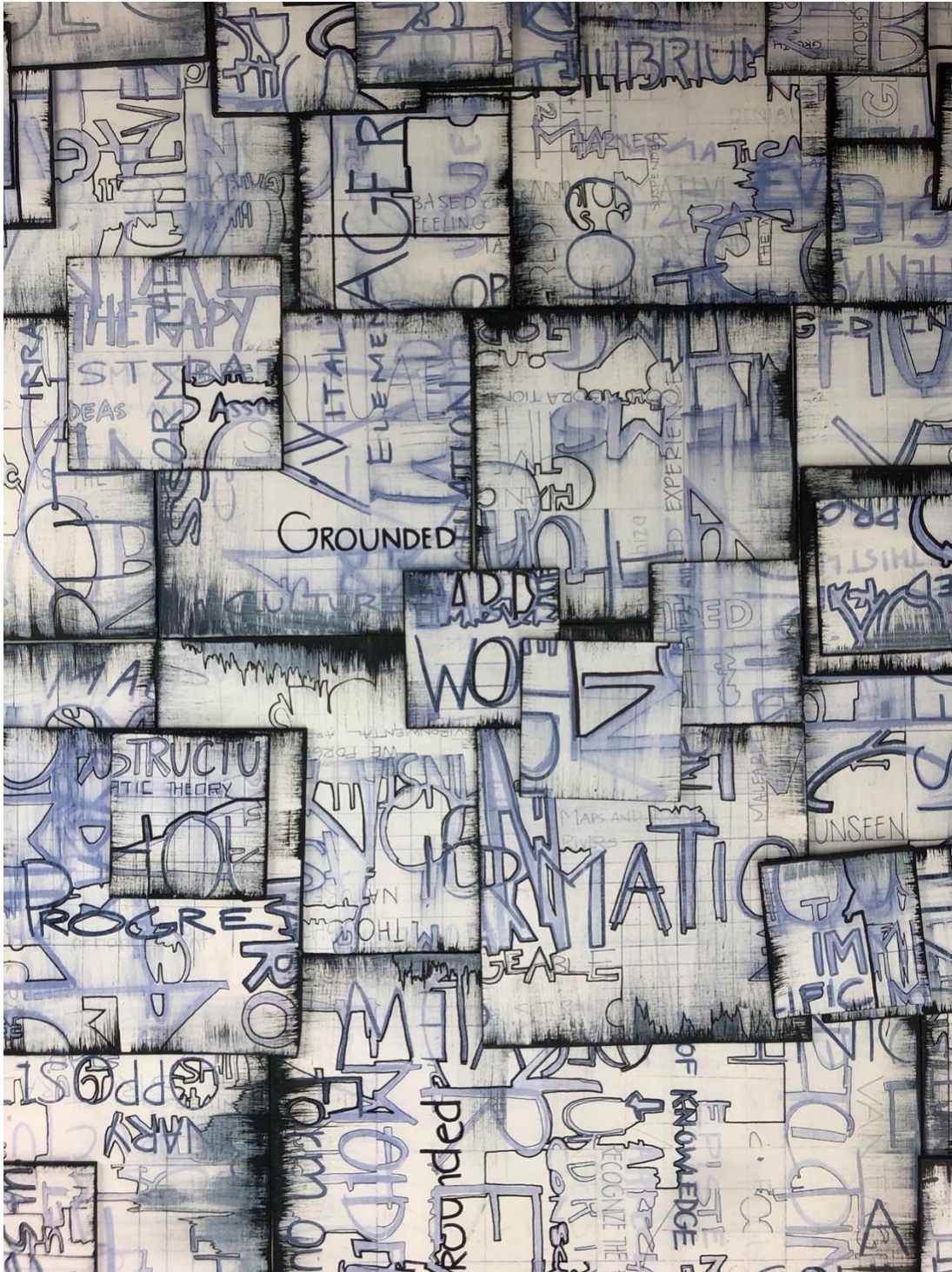


Image #1: *Grounded (Detail 1)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

The Struggle with Identity and Meaning

“To just go off in the woods and just make a piece of work roots me again and if I don’t work for a period of time, I feel root-less. I don’t know myself.”

- Andy Goldsworthy

I am obsessed with a search for meaning. My obsession is specific: I am convinced that the beauty of branching, fluid, reaching forms that are found repeatedly in the spatial, temporal material world (neurons, rhizomes, roots, rivers) reveal a connectedness of humanities inherent relationship with nature. This search had led into extensive readings: (from Physics to Attachment Theory). It is my “Holy Grail”: mysterious, fascinating, endless. I have found no concrete answers in my quest. The beauty of this form, henceforth referred to as *rhizomatic*, is the focus of my work formally and conceptually. The mystery itself has led to only one conclusion among a myriad of new questions: there is an aesthetic and truth revealed in connectedness.

We all exist as identities in-difference (and in relation to other). My graduate school experience has been a deconstruction and visual expression of the of the word identity. My struggle with identity is used as a departure point to negotiate through the paradox that I exist through others, with a multiplicity of meanings and to ground our relationship as flawed human beings to our connectedness to nature through materiality.



Image # 2: *Abstract (Detail 2)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

The reoccurring failure of the ideas and skills I have used to buttress my identity has led me down many different paths. The ideas I have about myself are no longer ideas, but things that have stayed with me throughout multiple upheavals of self. I know myself through the intuitive sense that I am deeply rooted in the natural world. What is left is physical, material and intuitive: the human body, what is around it and what I do with it.

When identity is presented as a plaything, my life and mind become a jungle that seems to need rearranging or taming. I create meaning through the expression of beauty and working with my hands. I process the phenomena of identity by objective abstractions of nature. I see experience as objective abstractions that remain subjective by nature.

My work is about thinking and searching for meaning and what the process of these actions look like when they are invisible. Without being imbedded in outcome or context, lines are just paths, thoughts, contours of decisions that makeup networks of lived experience.

My objective in my artwork and thesis is:

- to explore Rhizomatic Theory and mycorrhizal fungi in relation to my work
- to use biomorphic forms to evoke bodily recognition
- to present artists that have influenced my studio practice and their processes
- to present my exhibition work in context to capitalism as well as the disconnection we have to nature and to developing knowledge in science, theory, climate change.

My exhibition and writing is Deleuzian in practice as I outline below, and is meant to explore potential associations and challenge the traditional, even academic, structures of art making and writing. My art work is created without visual focal points as a way for the viewer to consider the parts in relationship to the whole. The Rhizomatic Theory works to expand the context for understanding nuanced relationships within complex systems.



Image # 3: *Abstract (Detail 3)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

The Rhizome and Rhizomatic Theory

Rhizomatic Theory encapsulates the many faces of Postmodern and contemporary thought. While this theory is gaining prominence in circles of critical theory studies, there is a simultaneous discovery in scientific research of mycorrhizal fungi in forests that have proven that the structure of nature is not linear, dichotomous nor disconnected. Hence, rhizomatic connections in theory and in structure are beneficial for the sustainability and health of a diverse forest that provide a visual structure of how a human might navigate complex physical or abstract systems.

I hypothesize that as forms and ideas, the investigation of Rhizomatic Theory and the concrete reality of mycorrhizal fungi relate to our human struggle with identity. Being able to identify characteristics within a rhizome allows for a subjective understanding of an objective state of being. The framework of identity breaks down in the condition of being connected within a network and the inevitability of change and mortality.

Rhizomatic Theory is a concept developed by two 20th century French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and can be described as “an image of thought.”¹ Here the image of a rhizome is used to illustrate an unrestricted stream of thought that grows as a rhizome horizontally and is always in the state of becoming. This concept counters Western civilized and academic thinking as it has traditionally been organized in hierarchies and binaries.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, “The Image of Thought,” in *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 129-167.



Image # 4: *Rhizome (Detail 1)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari are proposing that classical ways of formulating ideas that present themselves as dichotomous, binary and hierarchical are contrary to nature. “Nature doesn’t work that way: in nature, roots are taproots with more multiple, lateral, and circular systems of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one. Thought lags behind nature.”² *A Thousand Plateaus* was written as a rhizome and intended to be read that way. You can enter or exit the book at any point. “How could the law of the book reside in nature, when it is what presides over the very division between world and book, nature and art?”³

Rhizomatic thought is approached with the potentiality of connections that are possible outside rational approaches to knowledge or concepts. It is a creative approach to thought, art, and science. Among other things, Rhizomatic Theory is being used in teaching methods, as more

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1987), pp. 3-25.

³ Deleuze and Guattari, “A *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,” 5.

educators are acknowledging there are multiple paths to the same and different conclusions.⁴

Rhizomatic models of virtual learning are being created to respond to the “complexity, multiplicity, unpredictability and multivoicedness” that exists in reality.⁵

Rhizomatic relationships are not finite but allow multiplicity, containing physical, creative, aesthetic, perceptual, ethical, spiritual, and psychological relationships that connect in non-traditional ways. Rhizomatic thinking provides an open-ended experience for the artist in terms of associations, material, and process.

Robert Smithson, American land artist, described this way of working a decade before Deleuze and Guattari articulated it in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “At the low levels of consciousness the artist experiences undifferentiated or unbounded methods of procedure that break with the focused limits of rational technique.”⁶

I quote at length an excerpt from Robert Smithson, *Sedimentation of the Mind* in which he poetically spatialized the mind and the body onto the landscape.

The earth’s surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other – one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects, or what I will call ‘abstract geology.’ One’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. The

⁴ Dave Cormier, “Davecormier.com,” *aDavecormier.com* (blog) (Wordpress, November 5, 2011), <http://davecormier.com/edblog/2011/11/05/rhizomatic-learning-why-learn/>.

⁵ Alexios Brailas, “Rhizomatic Learning in Action: A Virtual Exposition for Demonstrating Learning Rhizomes,” *hTEEM'20: Eighth International Conference on Technological Ecosystems for Enhancing Multiculturality*, October 2020, pp. 309-314, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3434780.3436565>.

⁶ Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 877-881.

entire body is pulled into the cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid consciousness. A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched.⁷

The development of Rhizomatic Theory represents a period in Western critical theory when the mind, the landscape and the body seemed to become synonymous. Deleuze and Guattari were not talking about rhizomes as actual roots but applying abstract human activity to the formal structure of a rhizome. The theory acknowledges the non-linear aspects of human activity that includes art making.

Mycorrhizal Fungi Associations

As humans, we perceive the trunk and the crown of a tree as a whole, but the life of a tree takes place in its interior and under the ground. The experience with one tree is a sampling of nature, just like a book is a sampling of a single subjective perspective. Currently, Canadian Scientist and Professor of Forest Ecology, Suzanne Simard, has been researching how trees communicate in the forest and her discoveries reiterate ideas offered by German author and forester, Peter Wohlleben, whose knowledge was gained over decades of experience with one forest. They are leading scientists in the discovery that the forest has invisible connections underground through mycorrhizal fungi where trees share resources and communicate to create healthy and thriving diverse communities.

Before Suzanne Simard was a scientist, she was a Forester. Through this work, she could see the problems created by deforestation practices. Simard noted a main difference between a healthy forest and an unhealthy forest was that the plantation forests were sickly and lacked the

⁷ Harrison, Wood, and Smithson, “*A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*,” pp. 877.

diversity she had come to expect in a forest. “The standard practice was to clear-cut and then plant either pine or fir or spruce, one species.”⁸ This observation was similar to Peter Wohlleben’s experience of plantation forests in Germany that suffer because they are planted in grid-like patterns to allow for sun and space but in reality, the trees need to be close to each other so they can control the climate under the canopy of the forests. Trees planted regularly and too far apart dry out from too much sun and are vulnerable to insects and high winds.

The research concluded that in old growth forests the different species of tree root systems were all interwoven under the forest floor through mycorrhizal fungal association. Mycorrhizal fungi have a mutualistic relationship to all tree species world-wide, which creates an ‘internet’ where all species in one forest are “linked together in a single massive network.”⁹ Fishery Aquatic Ecologist, Dr. Teresa Ryan Smhayetsk, from the Tsimtian tribe confirms that these scientific demonstrations echo the empirical wisdom passed down through Northwestern indigenous tribes over generations. “It demonstrates those relationships that we’ve known and understood for a long time.”¹⁰

The science of the forest floor illustrates diversity and community while simultaneously mimicking an aesthetic and behavior repeated inside human bodies. Simard’s research led her to relate the mycorrhizal fungi as the “brains of the forest” because they are organized like the structure of a brain and behave like a brain transmitting electrical signals and chemicals.¹¹

It is the pattern and the behavior of these connections, the network, that I relate to in my process and artwork. I play with these formal aesthetics of connectedness. I play with the

⁸ *Intelligent Trees-The Documentary* (nordmedia, 2016), <https://www.intelligent-trees.com/de/>.

⁹ *Intelligent Trees-The Documentary* (nordmedia, 2016), <https://www.intelligent-trees.com/de/>.

¹⁰ *Intelligent Trees-The Documentary* (nordmedia, 2016), <https://www.intelligent-trees.com/de/>.

¹¹ *Intelligent Trees-The Documentary* (nordmedia, 2016), <https://www.intelligent-trees.com/de/>.

ambiguity of forms to infer on the intrinsic nature of existence within all things. “We often forget that we are nature. Nature is not something separate from us. So, when we say that we have lost our connection to nature, we’ve lost our connection to ourselves.”¹² The natural world is an aesthetic experience involving the senses. However, the natural world creates intellectual opportunities through the many connections that can be made.

The way I approach my work, choice of mediums, and thought is not linear. Each line represents one life, one perspective, one entry point, and one exit while simultaneously creating connections. My work is focused on the formal similarities between humankind and the natural world. Inherent to this formal investigation is the concept of rational/irrational and chaos/order. I am in dialogue between the human condition and the natural world. What arose, for me, in questioning the aesthetic of connectedness became a recognition of multiplicity and variation. The network form is inspired by the veins of leaves, lichen, blood vessels in human bodies, the sprawl of tree roots; the natural objects that house these forms are endless. It is a way of communicating, connecting, and creating links between all things inside our bodies. Networks describe the connection of the earth's rivers and the technology humankind has developed. Networks are everywhere and nowhere at once. All things, all things material and immaterial, have no hierarchy or structure to limit connections.

Art and Nature

“Art for me is form of nourishment I...I need the land...I need it.”

-Andy Goldsworthy

¹² Vitoria Habda, “Andy Goldsworthy Artist Overview and Analysis,” TheArtStory.org (The Art Story Contributors, May 2, 2018), <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/goldsworthy-andy/>.

Humanity in its history and global activity has always demonstrated a desire for interpreting, negotiating and representing land and nature. In this thesis, I attempt below to highlight specific artists and biomorphism as major influences of my work.

Formal biomorphism expands potentialities for the viewer while grounding the experience in the sensual. This is in part a response to the technological age as well as an expression of the physical collaboration of nature. The Surrealists of the early 20th century coined the term biomorphism as “a reaction against cultural and political rationalism.”¹³ Surrealism was inspired by developments in psychology and the natural sciences which underpinned the fascination with invisible aspects of the body and the unconscious mind.

Biomorphism employs forms that evoke living organisms, and these forms usually employed fluid, organic and ambiguous imagery. Biomorphism was an expression of (instinctual) human activity informed by the rational sciences and psychological developments. “Many biomorphic forms were seen as abstracted derivations of reality, both slightly recognizable and non-identifiable simultaneously. A common motif emphasizing this relationship between familiarity and ambiguity was in the visual correspondence between the human body and the natural landscape.”¹⁴

Biomorphism was used as a response to human activity: specifically, our destructive powers. In the early 20th century European artists were responding to the war and in a couple different ways. Artists continued to distance or abstract from the mimesis of the figure and landscape (Abstract Expressionism) and it seemed art was to go in one of two directions: an

¹³ Rebecca Seiferle, “Biomorphism Movement Overview and Analysis,” ed. Kimberly Nichols, TheArtStory.org (The Art Story Contributors, March 9, 2019), <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/biomorphism/>.

¹⁴ Seiferle, “Biomorphism Movement Overview and Analysis,”

abstracted mathematical or systematic approach to representation and painting or an incorporation of instinctual modes of expression as a critique of pure rationalism in life and art making. As a result of the Post-war state of things, groups of artists made work that would challenge the dichotomy of rational and irrational thought. Some of the tendencies in Modern art, particularly Surrealism, were directly influenced by Freud. “Freud’s ideas contributed to ‘modernism’, that is, the movement from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries which involved an artistic and philosophical revolution. This movement was characterized by a tremendous restlessness, a fragmentation of traditional forms, a favoring of the irrational and the subjective.”¹⁵

According to poet, critic and artist André Breton, who published the Surrealist Manifesto in 1924, “Surrealism was a means of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world...”¹⁶ This movement was an attempt at re-integrating the origin of thought with itself, which came before the conception of rational, logical and critical scientific exploration.

¹⁵ Roger Horrocks and Jo Campling, “Freud, Modernism and Postmodernism,” in *Freud Revisited: Psychoanalytic Themes in the Postmodern Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 8-22, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780333985441_2.

¹⁶ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Surrealism." Encyclopedia Britannica, May 28, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Surrealism>.



Image # 5: *Aesthetic of Connectedness (Detail 1)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

Artistic Influence

Making artwork started when I was a landscaper, tiler and carpenter. I would use remnants of wood or old fences to make furniture for my apartment. I would piece together tiles to resurface the tops of tables or stepping-stones for gardens. My approach to art making comes from having blue-collared jobs where working with my hands taught me about craftsmanship and the potential of materials. The artists that influence my work have an experimental and work relationship to organic materials that relate to the landscape but also embody a sense of play. For me, working with my hands was a response to the never-ending technological advancements of the 21st century, it felt natural for me as a personal protest of the technological age.

The artists that influence my work began a trend in working with organic material in the late 20th century, a time marked by Postmodern thinking which questioned restrictive structural and cultural ideas, the distinction between low and high art, traditional materials, what institutions decide what art is, where artwork exists and the role of the artist. This questioning caused a reinterpretation of the relationship between human, land, and art that goes beyond the art institution. Not only was there a distinct move to reconnect with the physical *and* natural world, many artists began to acknowledge themselves as a part of nature working in the physical landscape.

Giuseppe Penone



Image # 6: *Continuerá a crescere tranne che in quel punto*
(It will continue to grow except at that point), 1963-2003,
Giuseppe Penone
Retrieved from: apollo-magazine.com

Sculptor Giuseppe Penone was loosely associated with the Italian Arte Povera movement which began in the late 60's. His work was marked by a freedom in material, unconventional art practices and the view that human activity is not separate from the natural world but is an artifact. Penone used his own gesture as a sculptor to record his actions of engaging with trees. One action in particular was the artist holding a tree trunk which was eventually put in place permanently as a bronze casting of the artist's hand. "Just as the artist is created and shaped within the natural realm, so his actions doubles creation in nature."¹⁷

Penone's artwork is created through laborious efforts which at the time was "against the grain of traditional Modernism that relegated craft and manual labour to 'low' art, Penone rejects the role of the artist as a figure detached from everyday activities and acts as a master carpenter, a farmer, focusing on elementary and minimal gestures."¹⁸ In the work *Alberi*, Penone carved the layers from a cut industrial log to excavate the younger tree buried under the years of growth. In an interview with Thomas Marks for *Apollo* magazine, Penone reflects on making artwork outside cultural contexts and what this meant. 'It pushed me to work with what I was, in terms of my physical and cultural identity,' he says. 'Not having culture, not being knowledgeable about art, the only reality and identity I had was that of the place where I'd been born, with its local reality.'¹⁹ Penone attempts to examine himself (and his identity) in his work as culture-less, but in order to do that he returns to the landscape in a physical sense.

¹⁷ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera* (London: Phaidon Press, 2014), 40.

¹⁸ Christov-Bakargiev, "Arte Povera," 40.

¹⁹ Thomas Marks, "Force of Nature: Interview with Giuseppe Penone," *Apollo: The International Art Magazine* (Creode, September 19, 2015), <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/force-of-nature-interview-with-giuseppe-penone/>.



Image # 7: *Albero porta-cedro/ Door Tree-Cedar*, 2012,
Giuseppe Penone
Retrieved from: artobserved.com

Andy Goldsworthy



Image # 8: *Screen*, 1998,
Andy Goldsworthy
Retrieved from: mutualart.com

In *Art of Wonder*, writer Jeffery L. Kosky describes English sculptor and photographer Andy Goldsworthy's work as a potential regressive form of culture, "putting hand to earth, Goldsworthy repeats a gesture with which some claim human civilization began: farming or agriculture."²⁰ Kosky uses Philosopher Ed Casey to describe a culture born out of working on the land.

Culture and cultivation were synonymous in Middle English, a reflection of the fact that both words derive from the Latin *cultus*, worship. *Cultus* in turn stems from *colere*, to take care of, till, occupy, dwell. The mention of "dwell" forewarns us of a curious twist in the history of the word culture. Despite its current connotation of "higher" learning, this word has profound roots in the land and the soil...²¹

²⁰ Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Arts of Wonder* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 131-168.

²¹ Kosky, "Arts of Wonder," 152-3.

Andy Goldsworthy works with natural materials in the landscape. His desire is to learn and understand the essence of the natural materials which he achieves through touch.

Patrick Dougherty



Image # 9: *Out of the Box*, 2009, Raleigh, NC.
Patrick Dougherty
Retrieved from: stickwork.net

Patrick Dougherty is a contemporary American sculptor that works with young saplings to create site-specific architectural installations. Dougherty's large-scale works were inspired by learning primitive techniques of building which for him serves as a reminder that "we are all hunter gathers in a kind of shadow life and our ancestors sent with us the information on how to use these saplings."²²

Dougherty challenges old models of art making as his work rarely sees the interior of a gallery and he uses non-archival organic material that is meant to deteriorate in time.

²² ARTISODE 2.4 | *Patrick Dougherty* / New Mexico PBS, Youtube.com (knmedotorg, 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TLZrhvo-Es>.

Dougherty's work not only continues to push against the institution of the gallery but challenges the idea of doing mental work in the viewing of contemporary art. The intention of Dougherty's work is to allow the viewer to engage imaginatively. For each installation, the artist works with local volunteers. In my first semester of graduate school, I had the opportunity to help install *A Restless Spell* with Patrick Dougherty at Utah State University in Logan. I identify with Dougherty through his choice of materials, process, and underlying themes of heritage and community.



Image # 10: *A Restless Spell*, 2018, Logan, UT.
Patrick Dougherty
Retrieved from: usu.edu

Agnes Martin

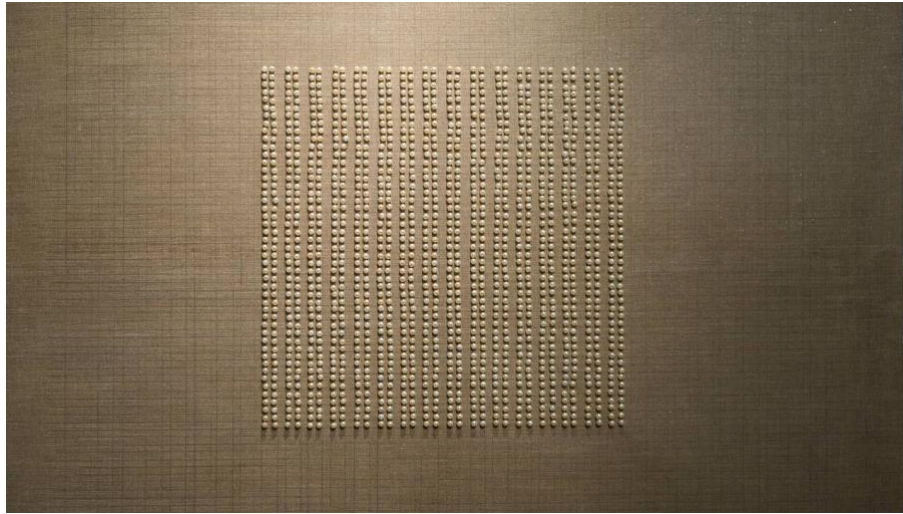


Image # 11: *The Islands*, 1961,
Agnes Martin
Retrieved from: kooness.com

20th century American painter Agnes Martin said she paints with her back to the world.

These words were marked by a time when Martin left her successful art practice in New York to live and work in isolation in a small southwestern town in New Mexico. In an interview Martin reflects on this time saying, “when you are around other people your mind is not your own.”²³

The industrious rhizome in a city can be deafening for an artist and especially for one that suffered quietly for most of her life with schizophrenia.

Similar to Martin, my work is like a meditation. I understand Martin’s exodus from New York as a re-integration of self as *nature* and a commitment to create an objective art form inspired by a decultured human experience. Martin asserts that she paints *pure feeling* on grids. “From music people accept pure emotion, but from art they demand an explanation.”²⁴ Martin

²³ “ARTnews,” *ARTnews*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/what-we-make-is-what-we-feel-agnes-martin-on-her-meditative-practice-in-1976-4630/>.

²⁴ *Artist Agnes Martin – ‘Beauty Is in Your Mind’ / TateShots*, *YouTube* (YouTube, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=902YXjchQsk>.

acknowledges rational thought as the abstraction of human expression beyond our understanding, while offering an interpretation of a sensual experience. Martin believed that math was beautiful i.e., perfect round numbers and straight lines. Martin used the grid as a symbol of the pure and ideal, while my own use of the grid is an attempt to control the randomness and chaos of existence while engaging with the natural world rather than turning away from it all together. Organic and meandering shifts of the linear movements are an expression of life, but that expression cannot preserve the innocence of Agnes Martin's grids. I believe Martin's work comes from her language of isolation. Her painting is an attempt to return to a state of being that is meditative, objective and quiet.

Tara Donovan



Image # 12: *Untitled*, 2014,
Tara Donovan
Retrieved from: smithsonianmag.com

Tara Donovan is a contemporary American sculptor who employs the use of multiples to transform the material and the gallery space. The photograph above was taken from the

reopening of the Renwick Gallery where she glued index cards together to create what looks like a mountain range. The time spent to create the work is apparent and taps into a mysterious and transformative relationship to repetition.

Process and Exhibition

“Our individualism has always been bound by a set of communal values, the glue upon which every healthy society depends.”

-Barack Obama

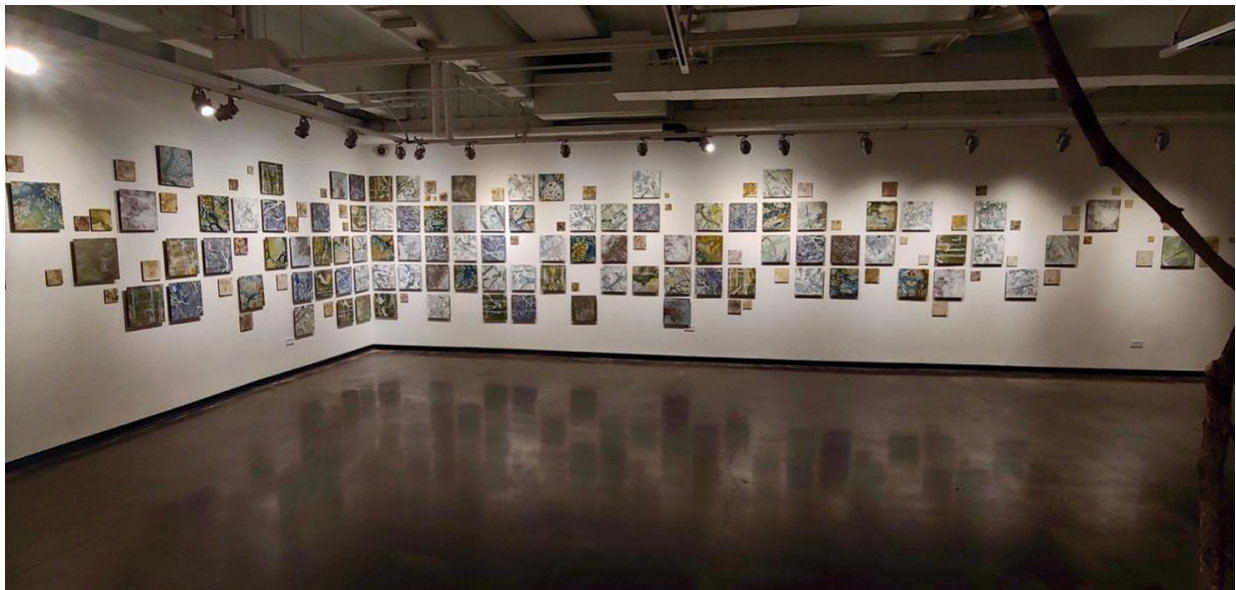


Image # 13: *Landscape of Difference (Detail 1)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

I wonder if we are in a reflective time as we continue as a culture to critique and deconstruct Western ideologies in the search of a more sustainable and equitable relationship to each other and the earth. I am using theory and scientific discovery to critique our current (cultural and economic) models through formal aesthetics.

My studio process narrates a negotiation where I try to create harmony and strike a balance, which are keys to our relationship to nature and key to human relationships with one another. My work has always been about transforming and repurposing materials and images. It

is about the potential of the thing physically, metaphorically, and relationally rather than the confines of the thing itself. There is an aspect of my process of adopting the natural forces and inclinations of the material or the references I am using. To construct with organic material, you must be receptive for the collaboration to take place.



Image # 14: *Aesthetic of Connectedness (Detail 2)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

The forms I create are ambiguous. In this way, the meaning or idea is kept open and fluid for the viewer. "It is a multiplicity—but we don't know yet what the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of a substantive."²⁵

My goal is to keep the work free from context that would narrow the experience. I am attempting to create the opportunity for a pure feeling or thought similar to Martin and my experiences within nature.

My process is a learning experience and becomes an excavation of ideas through the thinking hand, born out of my blue collared instinct to begin the work with my hands. This becomes unpredictable, layered, contingent, and collaborative. It is a human heritage to physically connect with the earth in order to understand it and self in relationship to it. "...the hand represents the technical already inhabiting nature in the human being."²⁶

The outcome of my work is about remaining in what I know. The exhibition envisions a cultural assemblage of connectedness and identity.

Tumbleweed is inseparable from its own nature. Its brittleness, its defense system, the way it wants to move or not move, the way it clings to itself...all these aspects co-author the work. Working with a material like tumble weed reveals its cultural history. The implications of working with something that is considered, on all accounts, to be a nuisance becomes transformative. The nature of the material and the idea of the material combine to make implications about the collective human condition.

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 4.

²⁶ Kosky, 146.



Image # 15: *Aesthetic of Connectedness (Detail 3)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

The Aesthetic of Connectedness is self-reflective in the sense that I am always becoming and changing. Ideas that make up the “self” or identity, are just ideas. Tumbleweed as material is an illustration of being able to re-imagine the state of something, including self. Tumbleweed has no monetary value and I elevate it into artwork as symbolic of transformation. My embracing of Rhizomatic Theory and connecting has relieved my “deconstruction” struggle with identity. A tumbleweed blowing about seems aimless, my mind meandering is not.

Again, like Goldsworthy, my use of natural materials signify a relationship that is indicative of a truth, a grounding of a human into the earth. The inherent familiarity of organic material is contradicted by uncertainty and the re-interpretation of the material (tumbleweed) produces attributes foreign to itself (soft vs. hard).



Image # 16: *Aesthetic of Connectedness (Detail 4)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

The installation, *Rhizome*, is inspired by a root structure and the various ways humans organize nature through grids and graphs, a mathematic re-representation of an organic root system that grows in an unfamiliar way. We are used to removing or controlling natural elements that impede our spaces and lifestyles. The expression of nature moving into the gallery space is the aesthetic of connectedness that occurs under our feet, in our minds and bodies. When we consider our relationship to the natural world, we have an image in our minds that is inaccurate to the actuality of the relationship. This is why we are surprised by natural disasters because the Westerner's relationship to the natural world has been mediated by needs, comfort, and progress.



Image # 17: *Rhizome (Detail 2)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

Landscape of Difference is made up of paintings and eco-prints cut into squares. I created eco-prints by using steam, iron and vinegar to transfer the pigment and impressions of flowers and plants on watercolor paper. Multiples of squares in different sizes throughout the gallery space are installed as though they have been captured in a state of growth and decay, they expand almost uncontrollably throughout the gallery, disrupting the grid.

The use of multiples (or multiplicity) models' diversity, which we need. Peter Wohlleben described mycorrhizal fungi as a form of communism. The scientific relationship between trees is mutualistic or facilitative and as a behavior it illustrates friendships, families and communities. This research of forests has a way of humanizing the natural world by using cultural and political descriptors for its behaviors and functions.



Image # 18: *Landscape of Difference (Detail 2)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper



Image # 19: *Landscape of Difference (Detail 3)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

I think about the Climate Crisis that has been created by global capitalism. This human activity has created something that looks like a global rhizome that is making its host sick. A network as a formal aesthetic speaks to a universal condition and also reserves itself from human contextualization. The global economy and internet have created a large healthy rhizome that is productive and expanding but if we could see the impact of the physicality of this activity, we would see the ground (earth) suffering. Is our future one of local and material connections slowly disintegrating while a large machine runs silently all around us?

My work responds to Western ideas surrounding identity and how it is fueled by capitalism and consumerism. Individualism is what was modeled to me in my family, at school, and through the media. Selling uniqueness as progress and authenticity. “Central to each of us and yet ambiguous in its form and composition, identity is perhaps one of the most complex and

contradictory concepts studied by social scientists. It exists between a constant pull of opposing forces. It is both singular and plural, real and imagined, individual and collective, defined by sameness and by difference. “²⁷ The results of an obsession with self in an individualistic society is illustrated by the natural world in plantation forests as mycorrhizal fungi research suggests a natural consequence of a competitive, separate, and isolated existence found in the plantation forests. Saplings planted in this way are not healthy.

I grew up hearing advertisement for the “American Dream” slogans like “You can be anything you want to be!”, “You are the captain of your own ship!” and “The world is your oyster!” I was asked constantly, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” Looking back, I cannot help but feel like I was being primed to “be all I can be” for the sake of capitalism in order to be a part of a working and consumeristic society. American society wears individualism as a badge of honor that creates depression and isolation. Group homes exist for the elderly where they go and die alone. American culture has created communities of people that rely on remote networks which makes us vulnerable, competitive, and isolated. Rugged individualism in capitalism eradicates communities. In a culture that is encouraged to go and succeed, identity is mediated through interrupted networks of communication. Children moved away from their families and support systems for the sake of the almighty dollar, which is a disruption in the most local rhizome, the family. We are sent out to compete for resources, housing, and jobs.

My return to the natural world is a grounding, a reminder ...away from cultural ideologies that entice collective thinking into unhealthy ways of structuring thoughts and our communities

²⁷ Stephanie Persson, “The Individual and the Collective: A Discussion of Identity and Individualism,” 21st Century Global Dynamics (The Regents of the University of California, December 11, 2010), <https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/december-2010/individual-and-collective-discussion-identity-and%C2%A0individualism>.

into detached and remote landscapes of individuals. “Plantations are like a group of only children without parental guidance. These trees are planted with clipped and damaged roots which results in disrupted communication along with many other dysfunctions. The trees are forced to fend for themselves which leaves them more vulnerable.”²⁸

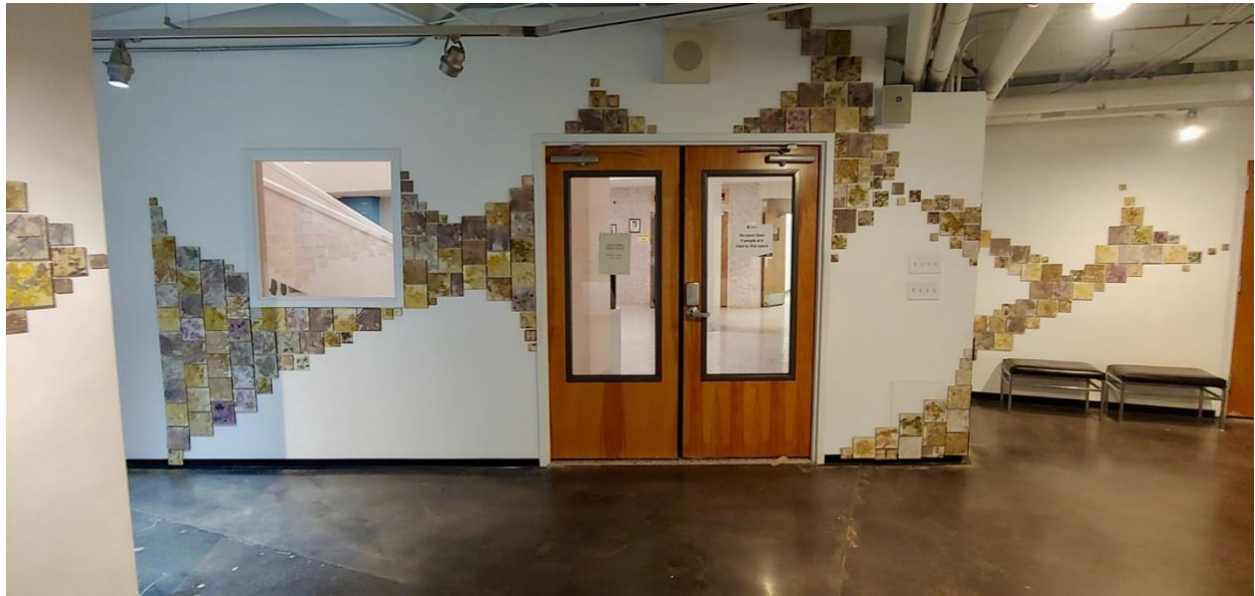


Image # 20: *Abstract (Detail 4)*, 2021, Rachelle Cooper

²⁸ *Intelligent Trees-The Documentary* (nordmedia, 2016), <https://www.intelligent-trees.com/de/>.

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