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ENTROPY

by

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Rachael Mayer find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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ABSTRACT

My work references communities, social networks, and systems. I draw influence from landscape and topography to communicate ideas around the social structures we influence and are influenced by. Drawing heavily on craft and anthropological theories, I contextualize my work within these disciplines and use installation and experience-based work to further these ideas around community and constructed spaces.

CONSTRUCTED SPACE

I make work about communities, social networks and systems. I am comforted in the connections we share and frustrated by the lack of communication between those connections. I think of community not as being bound in time linearly but rather as infinite points on a continuum. I use traditional craft techniques to make my work and the stitches that I sew or the weaving motions I make were also made by my ancestors—by all of our ancestors. Across centuries and generations, fiber complements a deeply human experience. We are wrapped in cloth when we are born and shrouded in it when we die.

I strive to physically manifest the connections we create and the interactions that we share.

Entropy is installation-based because the experiences of participants are essential to the conceptual underpinnings of my work. We construct how we see the world based on culture, relationships, and interactions. I use common materials to create connections between our everyday and how we construct our physical environments. *Entropy*'s skeleton is made from PVC pipe. I have left it white to draw attention to its materiality and inherent place in our lives. PVC pipe is used in construction and I have intentionally placed it in a gallery setting to disrupt notions of fine art and draw attention to artists as makers. The joints of the PVC pipe have been covered, bulked up, and reshaped with paper clay to draw attention to them. We do not have community or networks without relationships and interactions. The joints of the structure can be the weakest or strongest part of the piece itself. Without them, the structure no longer exists but

with them we can feel simultaneously protected yet confined. We can reshape our reality and relationships, much like I have reshaped the joints themselves.



Figures 1-2: *Entropy*, yarn & PVC joints covered with paper clay

While the pipe structure serves as the immediate construction around the viewer, it is aesthetically supported by a system of yarn extending from the joints of the PVC to the walls of the gallery. When we imagine our immediate communities, we are influenced by the relationships of those in our networks. We all have many identities—we are not confined to only one aspect of ourselves. Because of our connections—to people, places, objects— and in turn their connections to the world, we comprise a network that is complex, sprawling, and

inconceivably enormous. The yarn extending from the PVC joints covered in paper clay illustrate this idea—this enormity—of the constructions, communities, and networks that we shape and that also shape our lives. The structure is lit so that shadows play across the interior—mimicking the yarn and pipe and multiplying it to give physical manifestation of the infinite possibilities we have within our communities.

The tetrahedrons on the floor are the focal point of the installation and structure. They are on the floor so that participants must walk on them. In order to experience the exhibition, they have to physically feel and navigate through the space. I use tetrahedrons because while they are simple, they are incredibly strong.¹ In my work, tetrahedrons are a useful means of exploring physical strength of installations and also the metaphorical strength of connections. Tetrahedrons illuminate the ways in which we create strong connections. They are walked upon because we use past connections and structures to support our interactions now and in the future—we are connected through shared paths.



Figure 3: *Entropy*, tetrahedron floor

¹ Thomas Jeal, “What is the strongest structure or strongest shape under compression?,” Quora, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-strongest-structure-or-strongest-shape-under-compression>.

Place is significant. When we tell stories, we position those stories within a place. We have memories of the spaces we occupied and the feelings we had there. Place is part of the network we occupy. I draw influence from landscape. I moved frequently as a child and young adult and every summer my parents would take us to national parks, mountains, and lakes. I grew up with a small community—my family—and associated the feeling of community with landscape and place. I frame community and social networks alongside topography and landscape. *Entropy's* floor of tetrahedrons mimic valleys and mountains. They place the viewer, the participant, as a traveler between those spaces and connections. We navigate the constructions around us.

Each tetrahedron is hand-dyed through an ice-dye process. While ice-dyeing is unpredictable, it yields results that mimic streams of color and texture close to mineral deposits, granite, and rock. I find inspiration in photos I have taken from the Sawtooth Mountains, Craters of the Moon, Teton, Yellowstone, and Glacier National Parks. I used photos of these places as baselines for color composition. I specifically chose pieces of felt that most closely resembled my photographs to include in the final installation.



Figures 4-6: Sawtooth Mountains dye inspiration photos



Figure 7: *Entropy*, ice-dyed tetrahedrons



Figures 8-10: Craters of the Moon National Monument dye inspiration photos



Figure 11: *Entropy*, ice-dyed tetrahedrons



Figures 12-13: Grand Teton National Park dye inspiration photos



Figure 14: *Entropy*, ice-dyed tetrahedrons



Figures 15-17: Yellowstone National Park dye inspiration photos

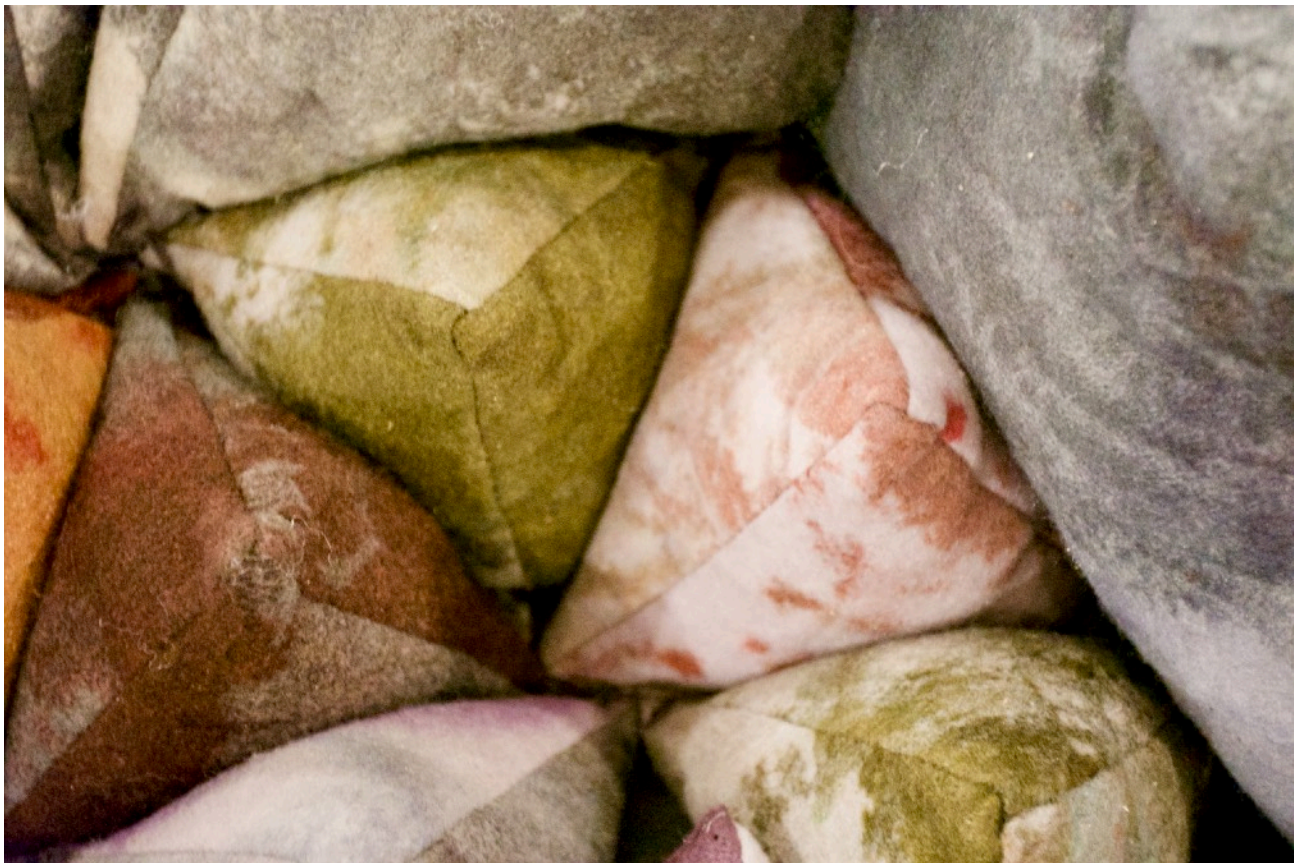


Figure 18: *Entropy*, ice-dyed tetrahedrons



Figures 19-21: Glacier National Park dye inspiration photos



Figure 22: *Entropy*, ice-dyed tetrahedrons

I use different sizes of tetrahedrons to indicate change and movement. Nature is not still and neither are communities. Our lives can change overnight by the actions of others—spaces and networks are constantly in flux. I chose to create dynamic movement in my installation in order to show this process of change and adaptability.

My work can be broken down into units. This is as practical as it is conceptual. In contemplating individualism and community, it is important to me that without all of my elements present, my work is not conceptually or aesthetically complete. Without taking into consideration the many different factors and factions within our connected world, we cannot see the whole picture. Referencing Gestalt aesthetics, the whole of my work is greater than the sum of its individual pieces.² Without each element, participants cannot experience the piece in its entirety.

DISRUPTING THE GALLERY

I am transforming the gallery space to serve as a single installation. In order to enter the gallery, participants must enter the structure. While this confines movement, it also invites participation. Each person within the space must navigate the floor of the structure with those around them. As the front of the structure serves as both the entrance and the exit, each person must be mindful of others and how to work within social structures to both enter and leave the space. Thus, entering and exiting becomes awkwardly intentional—each person is deliberately leaving the constructed space.

² “Gestalt Principles,” *DePaul University*, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://facweb.cs.depaul.edu/>.

Through navigation, participants will make intentional choices influenced by the experience of the exhibition—whether they are alone in the space or surrounded by others. Interacting with each specific component—whether holding on to the PVC pipe for stability or feeling the squishy points of the tetrahedrons underfoot—is the experience of the art itself.

FREE YET CONFINED: OUR NETWORKS & SYSTEMS

My undergraduate degree in Anthropology and Ethnic Studies informs my work.

Intersectionality has been a key component in my research both as an undergraduate and graduate student. Intersectionality³ recognizes that we are not bound to one perspective in our understanding. I reference “in” and “out” groups, practice theory, stigma theory, and symbolic interactionism as it functions within communities.

We construct meanings and layers to objects and symbols within our realities. Symbolic interactionism asserts that society is constructed through the meanings we interpret by the use of symbols.⁴ Individuals learn what behaviors mean through interaction—thus, human behavior is shaped by the way in which we interact with and interpret the world. These interpretation are not only present in personal, everyday relationships but also in large-scale social structures.⁵

Symbolic interactionism has connections to my use of multiples—we divide people by gender,

³ “Intersectionality” was coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw

⁴ “symbolic interactionism,” *Oxford Reference*, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libpublic3.library.isu.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195123715.001.0001/acref-9780195123715-e-1649>.

⁵ Ibid.

race, size, etc. based on socially constructed norms and perceived “in” groups⁶ yet in reality these have no biological basis. I am drawing on stigma theory to communicate ideas and values aesthetically. Multiples function as individuals and yet they create an overall work of art. These multiples are meant to reflect on ideas surrounding individualism and community—how we divide ourselves, how we think of “in” and “out” groups. Regardless of the many multiples, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts due to the imbued meaning within the work itself.⁷ Our communities are greater than a collection of individuals because of the meaning we impart on group interaction.

Creating meaning through interaction is not limited to social theory but has connections to quantum physics as well. Carlo Rovelli in an interview with Krista Tippett defines quantum physics as not how things are but rather how things interact with each other. Physics is the study of interactions and we as humans do not exist without our interactions.⁸ Community is not only based on the communication of its members but how those members construe meaning through interaction in order to socially construct space and value.

While cultural structures inevitably influence the ways in which we construct meaning and build relationships, we as members of society can change and influence these structures.

⁶ Heidi Goar, “Social Stigmas,” *Research Starters: Sociology (Online Edition)*, (2015): 1-4, <http://libpublic3.library.isu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=89185731&site=eds-live>.

⁷ “Gestalt Principles,” *DePaul University*, <http://facweb.cs.depaul.edu/>, , accessed April 2, 2017.

⁸ Krista Tippett and Carlo Rovelli, *All Reality is Interaction*, podcast audio, On Being, March 16, 2017.

Anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner considers the ways interactions and relationships can reproduce the same systems that shape them and how cultural norms can be changed by the ways in which we interact⁹: “Change is largely a by-product, *unintended* consequence of action, however rational [the] action may have been.”¹⁰ By entering into my exhibition, my audience may not intend to change the structure itself. However, as the exhibition is rooted in the experiences of participants in the structure, they are changing the space. Social change is wrought by individuals and groups who build upon the past to shape the future.

To contextualize these ideas around time and the ways in which time isn’t always linear, I rely on ideas present in quantum physics. Carlo Rovelli uses quantum physics in “how to look far.”¹¹ I identify as a craft artist partly to recognize its history in the world. I identify as a craft artist to contextualize myself with past, current, and future makers. The passage of time is internal to the world¹² and interactions are how we view time: the passage of today, tomorrow, and yesterday. Not only is my personal history significant to my work but also the history of craft is extremely important to me. Craft is ancient and regardless of culture, geography, or language, we share craft as a collective history. We have made vessels, cloth, and structures across time and space. Craft is crucial to our ideas surrounding community connections. On the entrance to the

International Museum of Folk Art in Santa Fe it is written, “The art of the craftsman is a bond

⁹ Sherry B. Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984), 154.

¹⁰ Ibid., 157.

¹¹ Krista Tippett and Carlo Rovelli, *All Reality is Interaction*, podcast audio, On Being, March 16, 2017.

¹² Ibid.

between the peoples of the world.”¹³ We are drawn together by the creation of craft objects —“something that began with the dawn of human time.”¹⁴ In this way, we move beyond time and we look far.

ART & CRAFT:

Within the theme of a post-structuralist academy and society, craft and art can be seen on a spectrum. In M. Anna Fariello's essay, "Making and Naming: The Lexicon of Studio Craft," she situates art and craft on a spectrum with the term "studio craft" as a place holder for a middle ground: "My own view of the craft/art continuum is on a sliding scale, with imagination and skill as part of every creative act.”¹⁵ At this juncture in my studies and career, studio craft most closely describes my process and outcome in that the process itself is incredibly important to my art. I believe my technique of labor intensive, repetitive work imbues life into my pieces and allows time for intention and contemplation while making. My hope is that this translates to my audience and that they also recognize the intention and enormity of the world in which we live.

Art and craft have had a strained relationship. When we clearly define the differences between art and craft or conversely merge them together as one unit, we erase a rich history. In addition, it is problematic in that we often identify craft objects by their materials: for example, clay is seen

¹³ Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), xv.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ M. Anna Fariello, "Making and Naming: The Lexicon of Studio Craft," in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 40.

as craft and yet historically, large-scale figurative sculpture has been made of clay and ceramic.¹⁶ Art and craft are social constructions. We have defined them based on how society interacts with these concepts, materials, and objects. Yet while the difference between art and craft is varied, constructed, doesn't always follow logic, and can seem unimportant, it is essential to identity and meaning. It is crucial to understand the knowledge behind the object—how it is made, what it does, and how it situates itself historically in order to fully recognize and appreciate the object itself.¹⁷ This is true for craft as it is true for art. Art and craft are enduring and when we use these labels, we pull on these histories (including their justifications) and contextualize our work within it.

I identify as a fiber artist. Like craft, fiber art is again broad and “includes any type of artwork which uses linear, pliable elements—fibers—as a major material.”¹⁸ Fiber art is constantly changing and evolving and is defined by the artist, the curator, and the audience.¹⁹ This definition of fiber art enables me to explore many different materials and techniques in order to most effectively encapsulate my conceptual underpinnings. Fiber and craft allow me freedom to create while also serving as bases to return to conceptually and aesthetically.

¹⁶ Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 5.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁸ Susan Taber Avila, “More About Fiber Art,” *Artist Website*, http://www.suta.com/misc/fiber_art.html.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Fiber work is critical to my identity in that it is a way in which I connect to my ancestors and re-envision the passage of time—by quilting, I am connecting to my mom, by knitting and crocheting I am utilizing the same techniques my great-grandmother used. Fiber craft work not only has a long history in my family but in all others—looking back far enough, we’ve all worn cloth, our ancestors have spun fibers, our collective history includes weaving, quilting, and stitching. Fiber work can be seen as a thread stretching back through time. Fiber art is relevant—it is robust and strong and will exist as long as we place importance on pliable elements in art and wearable objects in life and so in this way, I am also connecting myself to and interacting with future artists.

For my studio practice, fiber and craft are rarely separate in that I make craft objects through fiber work. However, to limit craft's definition to be solely based on the materiality of the object is not looking at the whole picture. Louise Mazanti states in her essay, “Super-Objects,” “It is this friction of craft, existing between art and life, that produces the backbone of its identity—and not the specific material, technique, or skill employed in its making.”²⁰ Mazanti further explains that craft exists in a unique position when viewed through avant-garde theory. If we take Peter Bürger's definition of the original intentions of the avant-garde, “as seeking to reintegrate the lost relation between art and life,”²¹ then “Craft inhabits another cultural position; it is an aesthetic that has never recognized the art/life dichotomy, which means that craft has never had to challenge its own limits in order to reintegrate art and life. It embodies both by its mere

²⁰ Louise Mazanti, “Super-Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 80.

²¹ Ibid., 73.

existence.”²² Mazanti continues this idea by underscoring that the potential for avant-garde is what surrounds us in our everyday: “When craft represents a practice that adds privileged aesthetic objects to the everyday world of things, it not only criticizes and reflects on society according to, or granted from, the world of art; it offers an alternative, already established link between art and life.”²³ I am physically representing the structures that define our lives yet we seldom see. I am adding a privileged aesthetic object to a gallery space and mimicking real-life applications—how we structure community and imagine its possibilities.

ENTROPY

Entropy is comprised of a soft inside and protective outside. I recognize that not everyone will feel comfortable in this structure—because of divergent meanings we place on objects and situations based on our experiences and cultures. However, in constructing this space I have had to draw on overarching meaning in order to impart values into my space. In Alain de Botton’s *The Architecture of Happiness*, he writes,

...John Ruskin proposed that we seek two things out of our buildings. We want them to shelter us. And we want them to *speak* to us—to speak to us of whatever we find important and need to be reminded of²⁴...

buildings are not simply visual objects without any connection to concept which we can analyze and then evaluate. Buildings *speak*—and on topics which can readily be discerned. They speak of democracy or aristocracy, openness or

²² Ibid., 80.

²³ Ibid., 79.

²⁴ Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 62.

arrogance, welcome or threat, a sympathy for the future or a hankering for the past²⁵...

The notion of buildings that speak helps us to place at the very centre of our architectural conundrums the question of the values we want to live by—rather than merely of how we want things to look.²⁶

In order to create a space that imparts values around openness, community, and individuality I have had to draw on theories, movement, multiples, transformation, space, and the overwhelmingness of community-making through social practice. I am relying on my audience's symbolic connection to create links between physical objects and ideas around community.

My structure is open with permeable boundaries. Yet because of the yarn extending from the joints, it is a confined space. Participants cannot venture outside of the structure yet they can see the systems and networks represented by yarn outside of their immediate environment. This is meant to represent the networks and communities that we cannot readily access even though they shape our current reality.

²⁵ Ibid., 71.

²⁶ Ibid., 73



Figure 23: *Entropy* installed in the John B. Davis Gallery, Fine Arts Building at Idaho State University



Figure 24: *Entropy* installed in the John B. Davis Gallery, Fine Arts Building at Idaho State University

If, according to practice theory, we are shaped by constructions of culture, ideas, and places around us and we in turn have the ability, through great effort, to change those constructions, then my installation directly addresses the art and craft distinction. I use craft techniques to pull on threads laid down by the many makers before me. Yet by also placing my work in contemporary art through installation and experience-driven art work, I am able to simultaneously pull on multiple ways of creating art and in turn have infinite possibilities for making.

Entropy references the number of states a system can have.²⁷ We can describe the universe in terms of entropy and as stated by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, entropy in the universe is continually increasing—meaning that we are constantly moving towards universe with more possibilities.²⁸ The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that no energy transfer is ever spontaneous.²⁹ It has direct cause and effect. We are constantly changing how we identify as we continue to have experiences, build relationships, and create and discover communities. I make work about these connections. We are constantly moving to a place where we have more and more possibilities.

²⁷ “Introduction to Entropy,” Khan Academy, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://www.khanacademy.org/science/biology/energy-and-enzymes/the-laws-of-thermodynamics/v/introduction-to-entropy>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Second Law of Thermodynamics,” Khan Academy, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://www.khanacademy.org/science/biology/energy-and-enzymes/the-laws-of-thermodynamics/v/the-second-law-of-thermodynamics>.

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