

BREATHING SPACE

by

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A Thesis

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of

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in Partial Fulfillment of

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of

Master of Fine Arts

Printmaking

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my husband, John, and my children, Matthew and Kaila, who have supported and encouraged me in my longstanding desire to complete a graduate degree and pursue art full time. Their love and patience are greatly treasured.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **BREATHING SPACE**

Suzanne DeSaix, MFA

George Mason University, 2012

Thesis Director: Professor Helen C. Frederick

Breathing Space is about a journey of developing artistic inquiry that moved from a macro-level sociopolitical focus to an intimate reflection on the impetus for art making. That focus circled back to an enriched perspective on community and socio-ecological themes. This thesis describes the artistic and literary influences on Suzanne's path to final exhibition and avenues of expression that have opened to a new beginning, including prospects for new genre public art collaborations. Photographs of her work are accompanied by reflections on the importance of the everyday and significance of place, and broader connections to contemporary social and environmental issues.



## **A BEGINNING NOT AN END**

*Place envelops and influences all experiences. It is as silent and as vital as the air we breathe. - Nancilee Wydra*

As I gathered my notes, drawings, and surveyed my growing inventory of projects for my thesis exhibition, I realized the resulting art work was telling me that it has been about my daily life. It is about connections to my home environment and nature in general. My choice of materials and processes that truly resonated with me led down a very personal path, especially over the past year, despite the fact that I had initially declared my work to be socio-politically based.

I wanted my art to be about local and global issues and elements of community involvement. I have a long project list. However, I was reminded that "it is always about us" by the very fact of choices the artist makes. This prompted me to consider how I am factored into my work for now and where I want to go with it.

Another critical turning point for me was recognizing that the thesis exhibition is a beginning, not an end. I am embarking on a new journey and travelling an emerging path of artistic inquiry. That inquiry does begin with me. Life, like art, does not happen all at once. My art can project outwards beyond me and encompass that larger field of vision as I evolve. The starting point is now.

Contemplating my life experiences, I now can see how many roads are converging into a more coherent 'package' of who I am as an artist. Only recently have I

begun to consciously meld these seemingly disparate experiences, interests, and professional work history into my personal artistic vision. For as long as I can remember, I have had a reverence and deep connection to nature whether as a teenager riding my horse in solitude through the woods and seeing the first green vegetation poking through late winter's dank leaves, or as an idealistic college graduate escaping an office job to work as an animal keeper at the National Zoological Park, or teaching children nature drawing while sitting in a field. I have had the opportunity to experience environments that are becoming threatened within my life time and I feel the loss. Many years were spent in office positions unrelated to art and the outdoors; however, my extracurricular activities always revolved around horseback riding and art.

What is emerging now as I move forward with my body of work is not a forced fit with me as project manager of a pre-determined intention. My works are artifacts of my daily performance of life. Over the years, I have repeatedly asked myself what compels me to create art. What is the motivation beyond the daily needs of life within the human psyche that drives people to create art? Ellen Dissanayake would say that our human art making, the 'making special' compels us to seek for something beyond daily existence. She ties this desire and activities of art making to human intimacy and fundamentally, our survival as a species. She begins:

"...it is in the inborn capacity and need for (1) mutuality between mother and infant (the prototype for intimacy or love) that four other essential human capacities and psychological imperatives are enfolded or embedded and gradually, in their time, emerge. Mother-infant mutuality contains and influences the capacities for (2) belonging to (and acceptance by) a social group, (3) finding and making meaning, (4) acquiring a sense of

competence through handling and making, and (5) elaborating these meanings and competencies as a way of expressing or acknowledging their vital importance." <sup>1</sup>

Ellen Dissanayake links the doing of art with human intimacy. She connects the 'rhythms and sensory modes' (e.g. vocalizations and exaggerated face and body movements) between infants and mothers as a biologically derived development of the arts. The rituals of dance and music, for instance, are patterned movements and sounds. By extension, the visual arts abound with visual patterns, textures, and compositions to which viewers can be attracted.

Kandinsky spoke of symphonic compositions in relation to painting. He connected music to the visual arts in the early 20th century. I believe his landmark text, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, is a relevant ancestor to Dissanayake's analysis of rhythms and sensory modes. He spoke of complex rhythmic compositions and compared melodic principles of music with visual art. It was interesting to me that, although his focus was on painting, he pointed to the rhythmic composition of woodcuts from the old German masters, Persians, Russians and Japanese. Also, Kandinsky posited that art making was a type of spiritual quest. Dissanayake takes it further by connecting this quest to a biologically wired origin.

Perhaps my concerns about our society's growing separation from nature, from our food sources, and the consequent changes in community goes deeper than a cultural and societal one. Dissanayake writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), p 8.

Just as it was essential during human evolutionary history for mothers and infants to establish mutuality, so was it essential for members of groups to work together in confidence and harmony rather than to act individually, selfishly, or haphazardly, without reference to tradition and communal purpose. Presumably, if ceremonies had emphasized only unrestrained individualism, perpetual novelty, and loyalty only to immediate self-interest, the individuals and groups who practiced them would have dwindled and vanished.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Art Instinct*, Denis Dutton ties art and evolutionary science together in his analysis of the human 'love of beauty' as inborn, not socially formed. This is not to say there is no socially influenced aspect to the development of one's love of beauty, but that there is an innate propensity for it.

What is this art-making and why is it important? What does it mean to me? Art is an experience that takes me beyond the daily surface of things, transports me beyond the mundane, yet it is also intricately embedded in everyday life. For me, a common thread is its transformative power whether intuitive, non-analytical or infinitely analytical.

Art is something that touches me emotively. It can be visceral. It can be inspirational in its concept or form, uplifting and delightful. It can be exciting and curious; exciting and elucidating. Art can ask a question and beg me for the answer; or, it can answer a question for me. It makes me ponder. It captivates my senses. It provides meaning to my life and connections to a greater world.

Is this, perhaps, at its primal base, a survival behavior both individually and communally to find meaning and motivation in life? I decided that before I could

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<sup>2</sup> Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy*, p. 61.

continue with my socio-environmental path, I needed to analyze and unwrap my personal linkage with art making.

Tuesday, May 12, 2009, I am hiking from Bear's Den on the Appalachian Trail near Bluemont, Virginia, with one of the family dogs, Shadow. We are on our way to meet up with my son, Matt, and his friend, Alex, who will be stopping briefly at home before continuing on their through-hike to Mt. Katahdin, Maine. It is morning, around 8 a.m. I notice the magnificent composition in which I am walking--the best of installations, exhibiting varied sizes, shapes, and textures that are basic principles of good design. I think about Denis Dutton and ponder his connections between art and evolutionary science. While the empirical research on which he builds his case reveals a preference for landscapes similar to the savannahs where early humans first began, I feel comfortably wrapped in beauty in this deep forest. Our aesthetic sensibilities that tell us variable shapes, sizes and textures make for a more interesting composition is something we teach the youngest of students. Perhaps that sensibility is not culturally or socially derived, but is genetically hard-wired. Can this line of thought help make the case for the importance of art in all of our lives? Can we make the case that it is integral for our biological success and living in better concert with nature, within nature? How can this realization be applied for society's benefit, for a global good?

## CONCEPTUAL RESERVOIRS AND THEMATIC EXPLORATIONS

*...the everyday harbours the possibility of its own transformation.* - Kristin Ross

My interest in sustainability issues prompted a desire to create visual narratives with the intention of reaching a broad-based audience, to contribute to a relevant dialogue, to pose questions and compose visual arguments for paradigm change. Historically, printmaking has been a populist medium for communication, particularly for disseminating alternative viewpoints to mainstream media. I believe the power of printmaking remains one tool for crafting thought-provoking images and providing alternative artistic visions even in today's highly technological milieu.

Printmaking was my medium of choice to pursue when I entered the graduate program. I was attracted to its flexibility of use, layering possibilities and the tactile satisfaction of scribing into metal or carving into wood. Through developing my printmaking skills, I felt that my concepts could be better realized than before. Although my early attempts in the program resulted in a number of unresolved and visually constrained compositions, those prints can be revisited and reworked.

Searching for contemporary visual and topic-related benchmarks, two printmaking artists came to my attention, Enrique Chagoya and Sue Coe.

Enrique Chagoya is an important figure in the arena of visual politics. Although, he does not believe that the artist will change the world, he explained to a group of us

participating in GMU's Navigation Press (2010), he wants to maintain the tension and keep attention on the conflict. Out of conflict come cogent questions to ask about human social and political paradigms that close us into a certain way of thinking. He creates visual narratives of turmoil with juxtapositions of cartoon characters, violence, suppression and even humorous elements.



**Figure 1:** Enrique Chagoya, *When Paradise Arrived*, charcoal and pastel on paper, 1989

Chagoya began his career as a political cartoonist and is famous for scathing satire. He comments, "My work is a product of collisions between historical vision and contemporary paradigms."<sup>3</sup> His statement ties closely to a larger ongoing debate that questions the role of contemporary artists in general., particularly as discussed in Suzanne

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Selz, ed., *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 180.

Lacy's *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. In this compendium of artist writings the focus is on a relatively new role of artist as facilitator of alternative voices within communities. This role contrasts with that previously associated with public art whereby an artist created site-specific pieces commissioned by corporations or governmental organizations. Critics of public art point to its use as propaganda throughout history, the most prevalent and visible being large statues created for the glorification of governments and their leaders. New genre public art links the artist with a community-defined project.

Sue Coe's art came to my attention many years ago while viewing an exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. Her expressive, bold lines pulled me closer to inspect, whereupon the raw, visceral imagery of her message exploded. Coe's art has dealt with, among other animal and human rights issues, the raising and slaughter of meat animals and the cruelty of that system.



**Figure 2:** Sue Coe, *Auschwitz begins whenever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks they are only animals*

Her use of printmaking to raise awareness of issues dear to her, is multi-layered. She creates prints for gallery showings, smaller affordable prints for wider distribution,



art works for donations to relevant charity events, and lives a life consistent with her visual statements.

Both of these artists successfully use the art of printmaking to advance the voices of alternative ways of thinking and living. A relevant essay by Lucy Lippard speaks to this mode of communication. In *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, "Looking Around: Where We Are, Where We Could Be", she references the historical uses of art as propaganda by governments and power structures such as development industries and banking. However, she maintains that through art, "no better medium exists in this society to re-imagine nature, to negotiate, in Donna Haraway's words, 'the terms on which love of nature could be part of the solution rather than part of the imposition of colonial domination and environmental destruction'".<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, 'love of nature' isn't enough, the artist must seek to show functional relevance for change, convey an urgency to act and reshape our frame of quotidian reference for how we live.

Just prior to entering the graduate program, I had read Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. Through rigorous investigative journalism, Pollan reveals the influence of the U.S.-based industrial food processing system and its insidious negative consequences on environment and national health. I had discovered a topic of passion that I wanted to explore through printmaking.

As Pollan traces the history of humans and food, he points out that mass production of our country's food, particularly the feeding and slaughter of cows, chickens and pigs, was created as a hallmark of effectiveness and efficiency fashioned after the

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<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 119.

auto industry's production line model of manufacturing. He also explores the evolution of corn from an early food source to its dominant role as a commodity that is non-edible in its raw state, but is fractionated and used in many of our processed foods today. He leads the reader through the creation of this cheap corn commodity, subsidized by taxpayers, to enriching corporations and the unintended, toxic consequences on our personal health and the environment-at-large.

When mass production techniques and business practices became employed in food production, agriculture moved away from a system of many farmers operating diversified, ecologically sustainable operations which contributed to local economies. Consolidated, large-scale operations known as CAFOs (Centralized Animal Feeding Operations), located far from consumers and their communities, became the dominant mode of operation. This system of industrialized food processing has created an environmentally damaging, ecologically unsustainable system, including adverse effects on local economies and the social fabric of many towns.

Traditional family farmers raised various crops and animals for market in addition to providing for their own families. This network of diversity was a system based on grass and solar energy, dependent upon life's natural cycles and species interdependences. For instance, cows are biologically made to eat grass, not corn. On a sustainable farm, cows eat grass, are rotated in a pasture area so they don't eat the grass down to the dirt which would allow less nutritious weeds to take over. When cattle are moved to another pasture, the previously grazed grass grows lush again. On a sustainable farm, the cow

manure is natural fertilizer for the grasses and does not become damaging run-off into streambeds, as is an issue with manure lagoons of large-scale agribusiness operations.

Also on the traditional family farm, chickens were raised. As part of their natural diet, chickens eat insects. When given access to cow pastures, they eat larvae in the cow manure which precludes the need for farmers to give de-wormer medications to the cows. When cows are living in open pasture areas, disease issues are greatly reduced. The artificial penning into grass-less, crowded conditions at the CAFOs provides a breeding ground for disease which the corporation treats with preventive antibiotics. Agribusiness continues to seek pharmaceutical 'fixes' and technological 'answers' rather than the root causes of the problems and pursue systemic changes.

Unintended consequences of the industrial mega-farms extend beyond the environmental impact. Insidious societal consequences have occurred with the domination of the industrial food processing system. Most of us, other than hunters, have become completely disconnected from our food sources for both meat and produce. The cows, pigs and chickens transported to large processing facilities are slaughtered by the hundreds per hour. Workers labor for hours doing the same repetitive tasks daily as compared to the sustainable family farm system whereby farm workers would share various duties. Joel Salatin of Polyface Farms, near Staunton, Virginia, is a national model for sustainable farming and supporting local economies. During my Teaching Practicum with Mark Cooley in his Agri-Arts class, we visited Polyface Farm and saw these operations first hand. Salatin emphasizes that no one should be slaughtering animals every day as their sole task. This creates a dehumanizing situation and one that

invites abuse of the animals. For those of us who purchase packaged meats, it is easy to be unaware of or turn away from the knowledge of abuses that occur in such a system.

The industrial processing of our meat animals creates many systemic problems in addition to abuses of animals and difficult working conditions. Toxic consequences range from our own personal health to global environmental impacts. The extensive use of antibiotics and hormones (to hasten the animals' growth and shorten time to market) affects our own health by eating this meat; environmentally-damaging run-off from huge manure lagoons ultimately contaminates our water supplies with excess nutrients and bacteria, residue of hormones and antibiotics. The animals have become abstracted chunks of meat, not living creatures raised in our view. The workers are no longer our neighbors, but abstracted cogs in the industrial slaughter line.

For commodity crops (e.g. corn, soy, wheat), monoculture is now the hallmark of the U.S. industrial food processing system (Agribusiness). This system is ecologically unsustainable by unnaturally growing crops on large tracts of land without any crop diversity or rotation. This system requires the application of chemical fertilizers to replenish depleted nitrogen in the soil in addition to herbicides and pesticides. The chemical residues then become run-off into the watersheds via ground water seepage or direct contamination of streambeds.

Pollan's book became a launching point for reading other authors' writings and viewing documentaries on the topic of food systems and large-scale agriculture. Some of these documentaries included *Food Inc.*, *Dirt*, and *King Corn*. It is a topic area of extensive, complex relationships, with environmental, social and political consequences.

For me, it provides territory for data mining visual symbols and connections to inform my art.



**Figure 3:** *Half Life*, copper etching, 2011

Consistent with the adage that "the personal is political", the above copper etching was conjured by personal experience with my family's garden. The garden space was prepared using organic practices with applications of well-composted horse manure from our own horses. Our horses are pastured on fields which are not sprayed with chemicals. In winter, we feed them hay purchased from local farmers. The manure is composted until it becomes a friable black gold fertilizer. For spring, there is an abundant supply ready for the garden.

Soon after applying the composted manure to vegetable plants, several began to wilt, notably tomatoes and potatoes. Some of these plants died, others minimally produced vegetables. After much research to uncover the cause, we discovered research findings by an Ohio State University professor indicating the culprit could be herbicides (<http://ohioline.osu.edu>). His research exposed a connection between several newly created herbicidal products on the market that are sprayed on hay fields to control weeds.

These herbicides target weeds in the nightshade family, of which potatoes and tomatoes are related. When manure is composted from horses that have eaten hay harvested from these sprayed fields, the concentration of the chemicals increases as the organic matter decomposes. The herbicide has a half-life of one year. Therefore, when the well-composted manure (which is about 4-6 months) is applied on a garden, it can kill the vegetables.

An *Organic Gardening* magazine article, "Imprelis Imperils", warns gardeners about the damage of pesticide residues in compost that damage plants. "The industry's rush to put products on the market before they are thoroughly tested has often resulted in unanticipated disaster" (*Organic Gardening*, Oct/Nov 2011.) The unforeseen, devastating consequences of our industrial production system are breaking down nature's cycles of life. I now wonder if the chemical residue passes through the vegetables into our own bodies and what effects will surface years from now.

Visual experiments related to the industrial food processing system, the marketing and dominance of beef as culinary icon informed the digitally manipulated photograph of *Cow Woman*. As part of a photography class assignment, my attempt was to create an amusing image evoking references to Egyptian hieroglyphic stance, Eve (with an enticing round of apple-red ground beef) and the ancient agricultural divinities, Flora and Fauna.



**Figure 4:** *Cow Woman*, 2009

As I branched out from specifics referencing the industrial food processing system to broader socio-ecological concerns, the duality of human as perpetrator and victim of environmental fouling suggested images of the human figure trapped within the confines of our own doing, a canning jar. The initial result of these musings was a reduction woodcut series titled *Packed in Water*.



**Figure 5:** *Packed in Water*, reduction woodcuts, 2011

Initially, this concept was derived from concerns about the toxic conditions humans have fostered in all realms of our daily lives--in water, land and air. My relatively recent experience of learning to can foods suggested the canning jar; the packed in water reference was gleaned from canned tuna labels and the association with being crammed into a suffocating environment. However, after completing this series and receiving numerous viewer responses, I came to realize this series was more directly about me personally. Objectively, it was not portraying the macro-level topic that I had intended. My developing body of work was pointing to my personal emotive daily involvement with my surroundings. The power of the quotidian was revealing itself to me.

During this time, I was researching the lives and art of contemporary artists whose work indicated an empathetic base with mine, whether in philosophy, individual concepts, process, or form and materials.



Ana Mendieta's *Earth Body* works from the 1970's were distinguished by the insertion of her body, or its haunting silhouette, into the natural landscape.



**Figure 6:** Ana Mendieta, *Imagin de Yagul*, 1973

Mendieta considered this work to have marked the beginning of her *Silhueta* Series. This and many others from the period reflect her adoption of themes of rebirth and the vivid connection between the living and the dead that are prevalent in traditional Mexican society. After seeing many photographs of her *Silhueta* series, I completed a photographic series of myself interacting with the home garden. These experiments were

directly related to my philosophical and artistic inquiries into the relationship between myself and my home environment. Many of Mendieta's works were performative and it occurred to me that my photographic garden series had a performative aspect also.

The photographs below are several which were used for a photography project. With myself enmeshed within the dying garden vegetation, I had the tactile experience of feeling the textures, of being engulfed within the compositions that were informing and directing my developing body of work. This particular series of photographs relates to the toxic garden issues referenced earlier. My exposure to Mendieta's work sparked the realization that I was seeking to transform my daily interactions into something external to myself, something to be shared visually and conceptually with others.

This series may provide the foundation for a future visual narrative in artist book format. My intention will be to portray the intimate relationship between human and environment; to emphasize the fact of human as part of the environment, not as analytical onlooker.

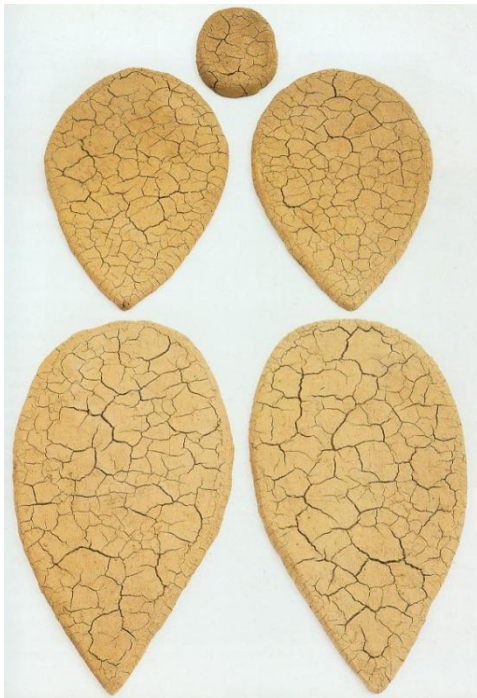


**Figure 7:** Select photos from *Garden Series*, Nov 2011

Mendieta's visual dialogues were dominantly gender and ethnic-based, particularly related to issues of violence against women, female fertility symbolism, Afro-Cuban symbols and rituals. Analyzing my own intentions in contrast to Mendieta's, I was seeking to create a visual package representative of the remains of my day, the threads of minutia that bind the hours in the day, the day to the week, the week to the year. Mine is a broader-based intention pointing to the human condition.

Each of us encounter different specific details, yet can relate to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Mendieta's affinity for natural materials and their manipulations resonated with me. Following are two images that specifically reminded me of my ongoing explorations using earth, vegetation and other appropriated remnants from nature.





**Figure 8:** Ana Mendieta, *Figura de Fango*, earth binder on wood, 1983-84

The next figures, both titled *Tallus Mater (Stern Mother)*, were created from ficus root with a polymer binding agent. These sculptures were installed, leaning against live trees, at the Lowe Art Museum in Miami for a solo exhibition. Both evoke the silueta shapes from her 1970's series.



**Figure 9:** Ana Mendieta, *Tallus Mater*, 1982

Lastly, with regard to Mendieta's images, I am drawn to her acrylic works on amate paper, particularly, *Untitled (Amategram)*. The rich earth brown hues of the textured negative space and the black brush strokes defining the painted shape, once again evoke a silhouette. The silhouette is cocoon-like, apart yet part of its background. Negative and positive spaces are intermeshed, just as the details of any given day can be for me.



**Figure 10:** Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, 1981-82

Readings and research on Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Lee Bontecou further inspired me with their rich vocabularies of personal explorations, textures and innovative forms. I have had a long-standing attraction to Louise Bourgeois' sculptural abstractions; the emotive force of her work is extremely powerful. The formal qualities of the pieces shown below suggest patterns of nature and personal connections for my own art, particularly sculptural paper.



**Figure 11:** Louise Bourgeois, Top image: *Femme Pieu*, wax and metal pins (1970); Bottom image: *Femme Pieu*, painted wood and metal pins (1970)

In 1964, Eva Hesse wrote in her diary "...It is an idea, point of view; the work is quite secondary. However, it is true that with the making you do see things which you would not otherwise."<sup>5</sup> This quote provides support for me to keep 'doing' and disregard any self-doubt about everything having already been done. There can always be another way of seeing, another point of view, a new manipulation of materials..

As an artist, Hesse began drawing and painting, then moved into sculpture. According to her artist husband, Tom Doyle, her drawings were "more like sculpture than paintings--the way they related in space--that's maybe why she couldn't transfer them to

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<sup>5</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1992), p. 24.



painting. It's a matter of finding your own material."<sup>6</sup> Reading this passage reminded me of how printmaking opened avenues for me to express concepts that I was unable to effectively realize through my undeveloped painting efforts years ago. Then, my introduction to papermaking with its rich new vocabulary of process, texture and form allowed me to pursue a burgeoning list of projects in relief and sculpture.

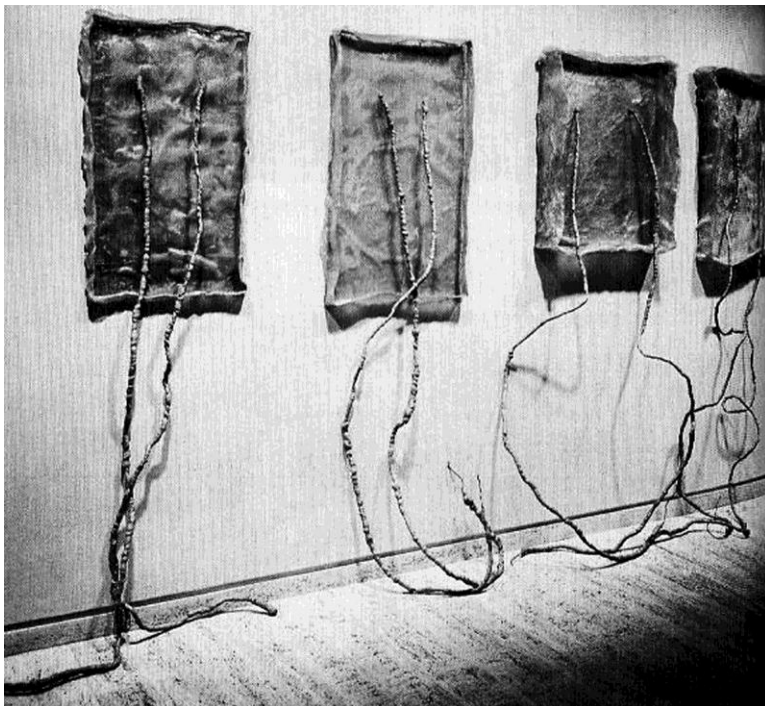
Although Eva Hesse was experimenting with industrial materials such as latex, galvanized steel, rubber, fiberglass and polyethylene, her forms were very organic. She incorporated cheese cloth, cotton and canvas which I consider very close cousins to paper, not to mention the base for paper pulp (e.g. cotton, linen). The cloth materials were often coated in latex, yet these amorphously alive shapes offer connections to natural materials and fibers.

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<sup>6</sup> Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, p. 28.

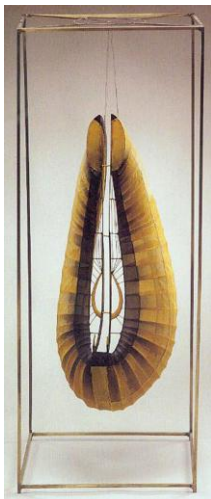


**Figure 12:** Eva Hesse, *Seam*, latex on wire mesh, metal wire, 1968



**Figure 13:** Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, fiberglass over wire mesh, latex over cloth and wire, 1970

Since the 1950's, Lee Bontecou predominantly used industrial materials such as welded steel, epoxy resins and vacuum-formed plastic, forging shapes with geometrics and the organic. In *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective* (2003), many of her sculptural compositions suggest biological forms, seemingly constrained by human-made materials.

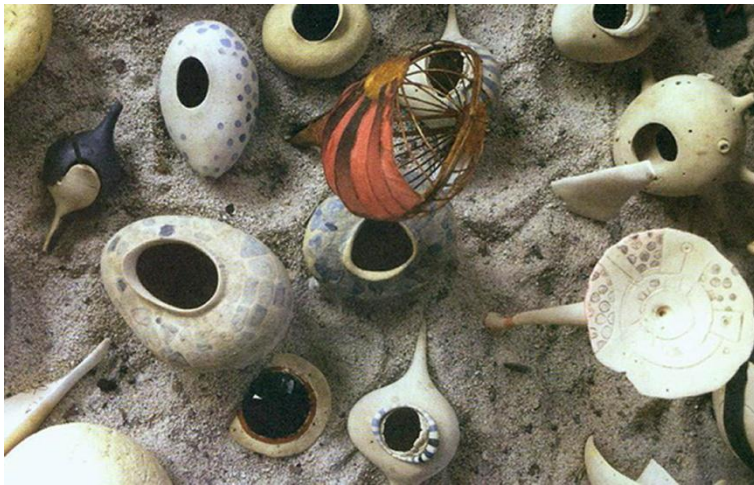


**Figure 14:** Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, welded steel, wood and silk, 1967



**Figure 15:** Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, welded steel, paint, fiberglass and leather, 1966

Most recently (1990's to current), she has created somewhat representational organic morphs of bizarre fish-like and other unnatural creatures using porcelain, steel, wire, mesh, silk, and plastic. These pieces are smaller than her large constructions from the 1960's and 1970's and are frequently grouped as installations in a gallery setting. Her presentation of these small, intimate pieces provides visual suggestions for me to reconsider my collections of appropriated totems and diminutive paper sculptures.



**Figure 16:** Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 2011

I began to look more holistically at my eclectic collection of natural and human-made items accumulated over many years. These gleanings from daily life, serendipitously selected from otherwise unrecorded activities, were coalescing into a personally meaningful visual journal. Adding to my collection with intention and selecting pieces as inclusions or references to be incorporated into my work provided a

direct conduit between my daily life and artistic practice. On many occasions, it linked the doing of otherwise onerous tasks to a purposeful link with doing art.

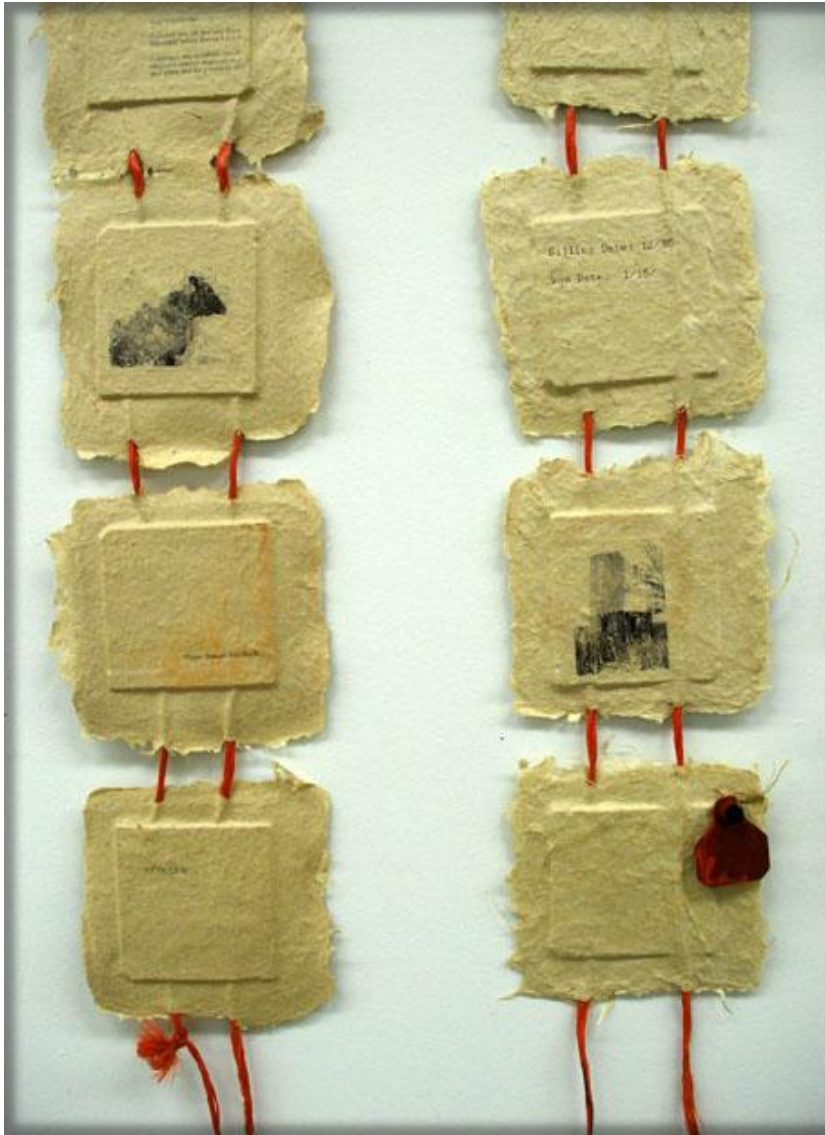
Michael Sheringham points out "In the sphere of everyday life, the project allows for everydayness by suspending abstract definition and creating a breathing space, a gap or hiatus that enables the quotidien to be apprehended as a medium in which we are immersed rather than as a category to be analysed. Projects often originate in curiosity or anxiety about something in the field of everyday experience."<sup>7</sup> This certainly seemed true for my socio-ecological worries and questions by externalizing them into form.

I began distilling my concepts and images; attempting to synthesize the essence of my daily experiences in relation to the visual statements that I wanted to create.

Abstracted metaphors began to emerge with a breaking down of forms, the body was becoming more integrated into the vegetation, into the paper. Color was becoming less important as my focus on texture and symbolic abstraction increased.

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Johnstone, ed., *Documents of Contemporary Art: Everyday* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p145.



**Figure 17:** Detail from *Two Bales A Day*, 2011

During this time of reassessment, questions emerged during critiques such as 'what do I enjoy most?'. Two ready responses were the enjoyment of carving into wood and paper making. This awareness, combined with my determination to turn off the analysis and research for awhile, allowed new conceptual pieces to surface. A more



natural visual language was emerging. Papermaking was allowing me to realize my abstracted, sculptural narratives.

Vessels and their implicit capacity to hold and retain substance became an intuitive topic. Expanding the definition of vessels into reservoirs as receptacles of memory allowed for a larger visual vocabulary from which to draw, literally. I conceived of vessels as interchangeable with reservoirs with their spilling, containing, retaining, preserving, conserving, capturing or releasing. Some are shown below.



**Figure 18:** Cow graveyard



**Figure 19:** String vessel constructed of hay baling twine, electric fence wire and reed, 2011

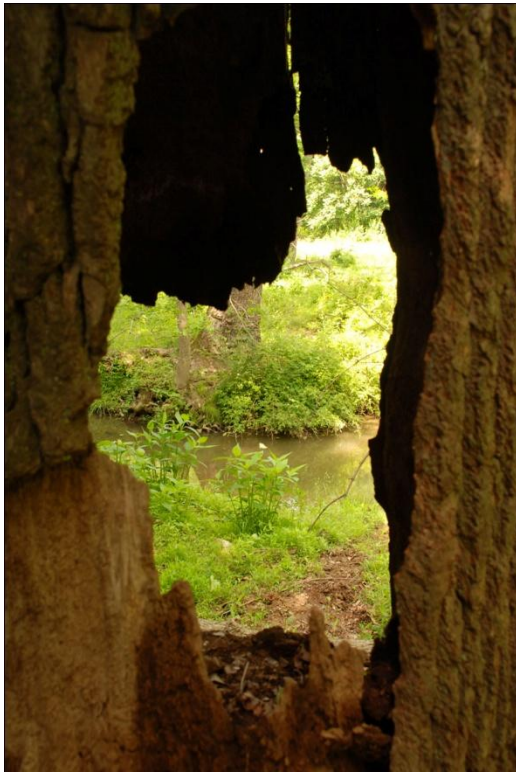


**Figure 20:** Small reservoirs with much larger personal meanings



A passage from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* seemed relevant as I walked nearby woods and fields, collecting artifacts and immersing myself in reservoirs. Reverberations of 'just do it' echoed.

Consciousness itself does not hinder living in the present. In fact, it is only a heightened awareness that the great door to the present opens at all....Self-consciousness, however, does hinder the experience of the present. It is the one instrument that unplugs all the rest. So long as I lose myself in a tree, say, I can scent its leafy breath or estimate its board feet of lumber, I can draw its fruits or boil tea on its branches, and the tree stays tree. But the second I become aware of myself at any of these activities--looking over my own shoulder, as it were--the tree vanishes, uprooted from the spot and flung out of sight as if it had never grown. And, time, which had flowed down into the tree bearing<sup>8</sup> new revelations like floating leaves at every moment, ceases. It dams, still, stagnates.



**Figure 21:** View through a tree, 2009

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<sup>8</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 82.

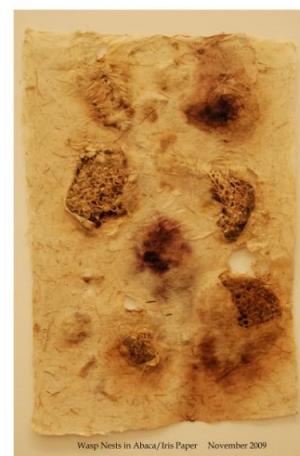
## PAPER RISING

*The stimulation of one sense stimulates another...synesthesia is the technical name...A similar word is synthesis, in which the garment of thought is woven together idea by idea - Diane Ackerman*

My introduction to papermaking and book arts through the GMU School of Art program directed by Helen Frederick opened new possibilities for expressing my concepts. The School of Art houses a professional papermill complete with Hollander beater, western and eastern moulds, vacuum table and equipment for spraying and casting pulp. The facility provided a research lab for me to explore an entirely new medium.

Initial experiments with papermaking yielded immediate connections between myself and my home surroundings as shown by some samples from my first paper portfolio and loose leaf artist book, *Nature Series* (November 2009).

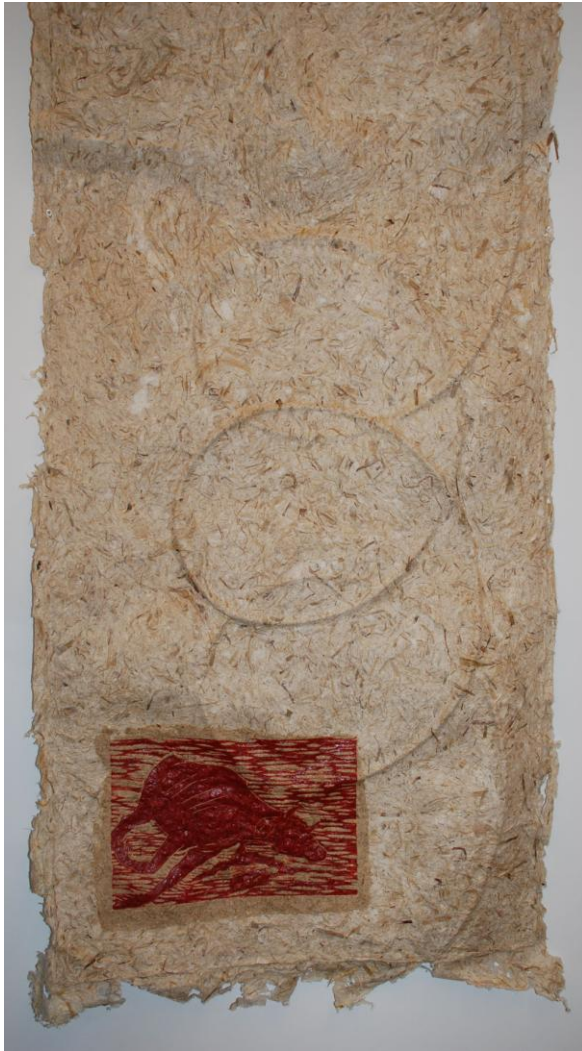
All of the inclusions were nature's leavings gathered during walks on and near my property or from working in my barn. They included a wasp nest, hatched turkey egg shell remains, turkey feather, corn sheaf, complete snake shed, and horse hair embedded in abaca and iris paper. Finally, through papermaking I was able to capture the textures and elements of my daily life. Now, concept, process and form were more relevantly linked for me.



**Figure 22:** Nature Series, 2009

The topic of corn infused itself into my papermaking, along with horse hair and hay. Corn, as the dominant crop of agri-business, became a symbolic fiber in my hand-formed paper. The horse hair and hay are personally meaningful as the horse hair is cut from my own horses and the hay comes from the leftovers in my barn.

The piece titled *Broken System* became the bridge between my initial focus on the U.S. industrial food processing system and the focus on personal interactions with my immediate environment. Although this piece was specifically informed by my concerns with mega-farming issues, this was a turning point for me to investigate my conceptual scope through materials and process. I was unraveling my direct emotive ties to the environment.



**Figure 23:** *Broken System*, abaca with corn fibers, IV tube embossment, collaged woodcut of 100% corn paper, 2' x 4', 2010

Moving from the macro to a micro-level perspective was imperative for me in order to move forward in my art making. Going through this introspective path will allow me to re-approach my macro topics with an enriched awareness and connection between what is important to me as an artist, how I want to present my work and why.

Why the fascination with paper? It is the tactile experience, the varied textures, colors of nature, smells and the ability to manipulate the material and embedded fragments of my daily life into a new form. I can create paper from raw materials and fibers which have direct meaning to my theme; then, I can write and print on it or sculpt it. The pulp can be poured or formed with a mould or sprayed. It is the immensely adaptive process and the product.

The gathering of natural materials for papermaking, the processing and transformation of these materials by my own hands connects me to my environment as a farmer to her produce, a hunter to one's dinner, or a gatherer to a basket of berries. It is a connection to nature and one's environment that is increasingly lost to many in our packaged, technological existence. Perhaps, it is also a lost spiritual nourishment.

Transforming the original materials, whether cotton fabrics or dried corn, into a new form adds another dimension to my concepts, whether the hand-formed paper is a sheet to be printed upon or a separate piece of art in its own right. Additional meaning is infused into an art piece with an agricultural themed image printed on paper made with local corn. The process and tactile aspects of making paper become part of the art itself. The hand pounding to separate corn fibers for paper becomes my own personal performance in transforming the corn from dried stalks to cooked fibers to pulp to a sheet of paper. Making paper requires focused concentration and mindfulness about what I am doing at that moment. It puts me in the "here and now" of creating.

It is this aspect of the here and now mindfulness which made me realize my lines of inquiry and the body of work that I have been creating are revealing personal layers of

meaning. This process has been unearthing fundamental questions for me about why I have always wanted to create art, why it gives meaning to my life and why it is so imperative for me to extend meaning beyond myself as well.

The sculptural capabilities of papermaking began leading me to compositions best realized as 3-D pieces, including various experiments with vessels. In Summer 2011, I attended a papermaking workshop with Winnie Radolan at the Penland School of Art. We made simple sculptural pieces using balloons and styrofoam as armatures with twine, wires and various found objects as inclusions into our handmade papers. We cooked and processed vegetables such as kale and onion in addition to using iris and other plant materials for the papers. The elegance of simplicity became evident as my collection of vessels and sculptural maquettes increased.





**Figure 24:** Balloon vessels and sculptural experiments with various fibers, 2011



**Figure 25:** Larger balloon vessels, 2011-2012

Since 2009 when I was introduced to papermaking, natural materials and local fibers have been important to my projects. Harvesting weeds and crop remains (e.g. cornhusks and hay) are not only free, but a satisfying use of this vegetation and



conceptually consistent with my work. For this reason, Winifred Lutz's article "Flood Paper" in *Hand Papermaking* (2011) caught my attention.



**Figure 26:** Natural flood paper harvested by Winifred Lutz in South Dakota, 2009

This natural paper was formed when the water beneath a freshwater algae evaporated and created a mat of fiber. In 2009, Lutz observed this large fibrous sheet draped over a road sign. The above photograph shows the piece that she removed, with evidence of the sign embossed in it. According to Lutz, the resulting "flood paper" has poor tear strength, is time-consuming to clean and process, and the paper yield is less than 50%. However, it provides an example of plant materials that may be viable to combine with other fibers for papermaking. Her article also made me see new possibilities that are underfoot. I will be harvesting local weeds, including polk weed and burdock. If any of the weeds are not strong enough on their own, they can be combined with other fibers known for strength.

Lutz sums up her philosophy and general manner of working: "My own method of working is to be collaborative with the tendencies that seem inherent in the materials that I use."<sup>9</sup> This is a philosophy to which I definitely subscribe. The concept for any given work will dictate what fibers to use and how to process them. The image of flood paper with its capture of aquatic organisms and vegetation was on my mind when I developed my paper pour concept for *A Month of Sundays* in Summer 2012.

After completing my MFA Thesis Exhibition, I received a copy of the catalog *Between Perception and Definition* printed for Lutz's exhibition at the Abingdon Arts Center in Pennsylvania. Several pieces reminded me of my recent experiments with the same types of materials.

Lutz's *Signs of Wear and Collaboration* (2007) contains a portion of ailanthus vine was taken off a brick wall. The vine elbow is a consequence of the interaction of removal. The flax paper portion was salvaged from a large piece for a previous show and damaged during shipping; the wasp nest is the collaborative work of many wasps. The idea that she viewed her work as teamed with the wasps appeals to me and indicates an innate sense of human as part of nature, not as an outside manipulator or viewer.

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<sup>9</sup> Winifred Lutz, "Flood Paper", *Hand Papermaking Journal*, Vol 26:4 (2011), (Beltsville, MD: Hand Papermaking), p. 6.



**Figure 27:** Winifred Lutz, *Signs of Wear and Collaboration*, 2007

*Paper Speaking Stone* is an elegantly simple visual interaction of the human-crafted component and nature's own creation. These symbolic dualities are conceptually important to my growing body of work.



**Figure 28:** Winifred Lutz, *Untitled (Paper Speaking Stone)*, flax paper and stone, 2004

Lutz combines appropriated natural materials with her own constructions of manipulated fibers and natural components. Her skin-like flax papers encourage me to extend my experiments with flax and other fibers and my own meaningful inclusions (e.g. horse shoe nails and horse hair).

In the following piece, I was experimenting with the variable shrinkage of abaca versus highly-beaten flax fibers (the vertical dark slit contained within the border of nails).



**Figure 29:** *Untitled*, abaca and flax with used horse shoe nails, 2' x 4', 2012

Lutz's primary sculptural material is "her own handmade paper, supplemented with metallic leaf, wire, stones, and especially deadfall or junk trees....That contrast alludes to organic nature and may bring to mind the animal or human body...She believes that objects can yield information not contained in words or images if only we attend to them."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Janet Koplos, ed. *Between Perception and Definition: The Work of Winifred Lutz* (Jenkintown, PA: Abingdon Art Center, 2012), p. 52.

Her finely crafted work points to the importance of fine-tuning the fabrication of one's projects. Even when using very rough and appropriated raw materials, it is critical to engineer and construct the piece to fully resolve concept and form. Lutz "exemplifies the craft mind-set, in which process is an important part of meaning, and in which making is not an isolated activity but is irrevocably connected with all aspects of living."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Koplos, *Between Perception and Definition*, p. 50.

## IT'S IN THE DOING

*Everydayness lies in practices that weave contexts together; only practices make it visible.* - Michael Sheringham

By combining printmaking with hand papermaking, the surface on which I print can be symbolically connected with the image when topic-related fibers are used. The process of selecting, cooking and beating fibers into pulp is kinetic and meditative.



**Figure 30:** Hand pounding corn after cooking with soda ash

Professors' refrains of 'it is in the doing' and 'do more' encouraged me to suspend my tendency to over think the concept and just do it. Spontaneously dipping small, twisted pieces of wire into leftover pulp created from discarded blue jeans led to the



creation of *Fishing for Time*. The five species of fish represented are threatened or endangered due to overfishing by humans.



**Figure 31:** Experiment with twisted chicken wire and blue jean pulp



**Figure 32:** *Fishing for Time*, chicken wire and blue jean pulp, size variable, 2011



As I continued to emotively manipulate materials and pare down my concepts, the mental images became more abstracted and sculptural in form. The human figure receded in figurative importance, but evidence of the human connection remained. The particulars of these compositions began to move from me personally and flow into greater visceral, emotive, human and ecological connections.

In 2009, an accidental pour, shown below, was made after disposing pulp remains on my driveway. A few days later, when I noticed the dried 'sheet' on the ground, I pulled it up with the captured ground attached. This happy accident eventually led to the idea for *A Month of Sundays* created on each of the five Sundays in April 2012.



**Figure 33:** Accidental pour, blue jean pulp, gravel, dried grass and weeds, 8" x 10", 2009

Following are selected photographs documenting the making of *A Month of Sundays*. During my studies, Helen Frederick introduced me to artists' books as visual language in addition to the fine art of papermaking. As I documented the creation of my work, it became apparent to me that a visual narrative of process was most appropriate.





**Figure 34:** April 1, 2012, The Place



**Figure 35:** April 1, 2012, Marking the Site



**Figure 36:** April 1, 2012, Inspecting the Pour



**Figure 37:** April 1, 2012 installed in exhibition, October 2012





**Figure 38:** April 8, 2012, The Place and the Pour



**Figure 39:** April 8, 2012 installed in exhibition, October 2012



**Figure 40:** April 15, 2012, The Place and the Pour



**Figure 41:** April 15, 2012 installed in exhibition, October 2012





**Figure 42:** April 22, 2012, The Place and the Pour



**Figure 43:** April 22, 2012 installed in exhibition, October 2012



**Figure 44:** April 29, 2012, The Place and the Pour



**Figure 45:** April 29, 2012, installed in exhibition, October 2012



In Summer 2012, I continued exploring the importance and meaning of daily life, particularly reflecting on family loss, severe injuries sustained by my husband in a fall, my daughter's serious injuries from being knocked down by one of our horses and my concussion sustained from a horse accident which all occurred in 2011.

Also during the summer, my family carried out the wishes of my father (who passed away in 2008) and my stepmother (who passed away in 2011) to combine their ashes and release them into a river near their former home in southern Maryland.

The results of a wide range of family activities, incidents, ceremonies and my own meditations on them, resulted in a calendar piece of 31 days. Thirty-one frames comprised of the remains of the day, serendipitous collections and detritus, became *Gleanings*. Following are visual gleanings of the process of capturing these memories.



**Figure 46:** From line to cook pot



**Figure 47:** From Hollander beater to pulp to sheet formation with inclusions on frames

## THE EXHIBITION "BREATHING SPACE"

*There should be a piece that had no sounds in it. One can imagine a breathing space. - John Cage*

Breathing Space became an installation of sculptural pieces and monoprints inspired by personal interactions and connections with my natural surroundings, concerns about preservation, and the importance of the seemingly inconsequential details of daily life. The works featuring hand-formed paper with inclusions of natural materials from my home fields, pasture and barn reference site specific experiences and reflections.

In the early stages of planning for my MFA Thesis Exhibition, I had considered whether to include video and/or audio components. After lengthy deliberations with myself and others, I decided not to include sound or video. I felt that my installation required an atmosphere for quieter contemplation, for the viewer to experience the pieces and engage them without additional artistic devices.

"Silence introduced in a society that worships noise is like the moon exposing the night. Behind darkness is our fear. Within silence our voice dwells. What is required from both is that we be still. We focus. We listen. We see and we hear. The unexpected emerges. John Cage sees the act of listening as the act of creation."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is one difficulty for visual art, especially today in a world constantly invaded by external noise.

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<sup>12</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women Were Birds* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2012), p. 58.

The viewer, alone and silent, is forced into a solitary interaction with the piece, requiring contemplation, seeking meaning without an externally-framed analysis.

In *A Month of Sundays*, I was attempting to capture the essence and memories that ground contains. Paper pulp was poured to shrink and remove a specific layer of earth and its detritus every Sunday in April 2012. Each location became a personal archeological dig site as layers of emotional meaning were extracted with the overt vestiges of place.



**Figure 48:** *A Month of Sundays*, flax, abaca, hay, horse hair, vegetation, soil, gravel, size variable, April 2012

My work, *Broken System*, was juried into the National Collegiate Triennial Hand Papermaking Exhibition which was installed at Rutgers University in New Jersey during January 2012 and then at the Corcoran Museum of Art in Washington, D.C. during September 2012. This work was created in response to my concerns about the U.S. industrial food processing system. The husks and silk from locally harvested corn combined with abaca, for strength, formed the large sheet. The embossment, from an IV tube used for large animals, suggests a broken cycle that drains at the bottom. The woodcut image was printed on 100% corn paper and collaged onto the large sheet.



**Figure 49:** *Broken System* detail, artist-made corn paper, IV tubing embossment, collaged woodcut, 2010





**Figure 50:** *Broken System*

In my MFA Thesis Exhibition, I included a grouping of appropriated and manipulated pieces that was titled Reservoirs. As a group, these pieces are substantial reservoirs of meaning for my entire exhibition. Reservoirs encompass both process and form. They encapsulate memory, are containers of past tense remnants and contemplations of shifting place.



**Figure 51:** *Reservoirs*, twine, reed, wire, metal, plant material, deer antler, equine spinal tap needle, live animal traps, tree branch, 2010-2011



One of the most significant locations for me in terms of reservoirs of memory and meaning is my barn. Horses have been an important part of my life since I was a pre-teen. In fact, one could say that I worked to afford my horse and I felt so fortunate when I was able to have one, then several, in my own backyard as an adult.

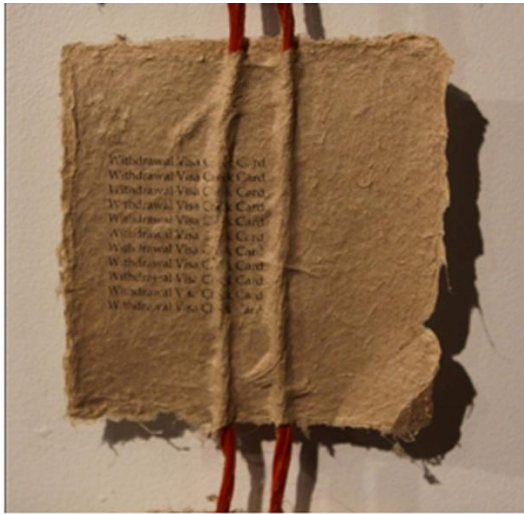
Mucking stalls in my barn. It's late fall and I've started feeding hay to my horses since the nutrition in the grass is diminished and the pasture is receding into a winter mat of texture. I've estimated that two bales a day should, hopefully, get me through the remainder of winter for feeding them. Often, while cleaning the barn, I think about many of life's little details--tasks, family activities, aspirations inspired by or derailed by the administrivia of life, memories, and worries that sometimes can be solved in my head while mucking those stalls.

*Two Bales A Day* is a result of these musings. The paper is made from the leavings of hay in my barn. Encased in the paper are computer diskettes of family documents, correspondence and records. Fragments of text and images are punctuated by cattle ear tags symbolic of those periodic events that interrupt the quotidian flow.

The hay paper progressively thins as it moves toward the final week. A trail of baling twine links the last day of the 19th week with a tangled pile of twine that loops back to the beginning of the piece.



**Figure 52:** *Two Bales A Day*, artist-made hay paper with printed images and text, inclusions of computer diskettes containing family documents, cattle ear tags, twine, size variable, May-June 2011



**Figure 53:** Details from *Two Bales A Day*

*The Gleaners and I*, a documentary by Agnes Varda, ties contemporary gleaners in France with the history of those who reap leftover produce from fields already harvested. This was a process integrated into communities. It allowed the poor to better provide for themselves and their families by gathering the discarded or cast off remains of the harvest.

Time and place began mentally forming into a calendar of personal gleanings. Blue jeans, symbolic of everyday clothing, seemed a natural choice for this piece. The paper for my *Gleanings* would be made of worn-out blue jeans from family and friends.



**Figure 54:** *Gleanings*, artist--made paper of blue jeans from family and friends, covered frames with print, stencils, inclusions, embossments, rubbings, 31-12" x 12" each, June-August 2012

References in this piece range from a day of seemingly nothing to days punctuated with special moments and days of family loss. Daily detritus, the remains of the day, create our personal narratives taking the inconsequential into accumulated significance.



**Figure 55:** Details from *Gleanings*



I had sketched images of a human figure inside a canning jar when considering notions of conservation, self-preservation and human interconnectedness within the natural world. Have we isolated ourselves too much from our natural surroundings? Can we preserve it; can we preserve ourselves? As previously discussed, my original series was a set of color reduction woodcut prints. After completing them, there seemed to be a disconnect between concept and composition. When preparing for the thesis exhibition, however, I wanted to explore printing the remaining marks from each block onto a ground of personally meaningful fibers (e.g. hay, corn, horse hair) The results suggested a more intimate thread, yet one that could lead into a larger context.



**Figure 56:** *Jam*, woodcut monoprints on artist-made paper of flax, abaca, hay, corn, horse hair, 2' x 4' each, July-Sept 2012

For the 3-dimensional diptych, *Trauma Tap*, concerns about human interventions into the environment and the duality of intended outcomes and unintended consequences inform this piece. The original mental image and sketch were specifically inspired by family experience in our supposedly organic garden. Composted horse manure applied to the vegetables caused serious wilt and death for many plants. Research revealed new generation herbicides had been sprayed on the hay that we fed our horses. The toxic chemicals pass through the horses' intestines and remain toxic in the compost for an extended time. The needles and syringes represent toxic injections into the environment. The title, *Trauma Tap*, refers to a term used when a spinal tap procedure results in a leakage into surrounding tissue causing severe discomfort. While creating this piece, the layering of wet hand-formed sheets of paper onto the form felt like grafting skin, interlacing tissue, suggesting to me the interconnectedness of animal, plant and shared environment.





**Figure 57:** *Trauma Tap*, flax, abaca, hay, corn, horse hair, equine syringes and needles, cow vertebrae, glass jar, okra, plastic oxygen tubing, salvaged oak pasture boards, 2'w x 6'l x 30"h, Aug-Sept 2012



**Figure 58:** Detail from *Trauma Tap*



**Figure 59:** Detail from *Trauma Tap*



**Figure 60:** Close up of syringes in *Trauma Tap*

Over the past few years, canning jars have become a common sight around my house. My family recently learned the skill of canning to preserve our garden produce. In my art, the canning jar became a recurring motif as a vessel, another symbolic reservoir.

One result of my sculptural explorations with paper became *Urn*. I hand formed chicken wire as my armature, then coiled wet sheets of paper made from leftover pulp onto the wire. Initially, I had considered this piece an incidental exercise. Ultimately, however, it became a complete and fully resolved vessel. Rusted, used horse shoe nails puncture the skin of the jar suggesting moments that can pierce into one's day.



**Figure 61:** *Urn*, wire, artist-made paper discards from past projects, flax, abaca, garden vegetation, horse shoe nails, horse hair, tree stump, 12.5" dia x 4' h, 2011-2012

## WHERE AM I GOING WITH THIS?

*What matters is the potency of a belief, the manner in which a conviction plays out in the day-to-day lives of a people, for in a very real sense this determines the ecological footprint of a culture... - Wade Davis*

When I began the program and declared my work to be sociopolitical, I quickly realized the door was opened to myriad questions and issues related to its purpose and distribution. Why am I doing this? Is it worthwhile? Is it only a selfish cathartic act or of some greater meaning and purpose? How and where do I distribute these works to an appropriate audience? How can this visual vehicle for awareness be effectively created without being preachy?

Another question arose during group discussions as to why one should do sociopolitical art versus community service. Why not directly perform an action related to the given cause? I argue that these are not mutually exclusive activities. Both can relevantly address an issue from different modes of action. One can do the community service and create relevant art, or do one and not the other, yet be a positive force. The community service action is a direct, personal involvement with an organization related to the specific cause. It is making a difference as one individual, one act at a time. Making the art is creating a vehicle for raising awareness beyond oneself. It is one of many artistic mediums that historically have contributed to consciousness raising, action and change--music, poetry, literature, cinema.

The desire to contribute to a cause is inherent in both actions. The desire to create art related to a cause originates with the artist's endeavor to seek connections, give expression to concepts, explore meaning, ask questions of the viewer and oneself.

Since the 1960's, artists such as Mierle Ukeles Laderman and Agnes Denis have led the way out of the gallery and into the public consciousness and conscience. Ukeles-Laderman's "Maintenance Art Manifesto" (1969) and her "Sanitation Manifesto" (1984) analyzed the role of maintenance systems in society. She tied the doing of maintenance with acts of art. As an artist, she declared the freedom to define what is art and created the living *Maintenance Art Work* project. In 1976, she invited actual maintenance workers to participate. The site-specific art took place at the Whitney Museum and each participant was asked to include their maintenance art on their time card. Their art was, in fact, their regular job tasks. She instructed them to re-imagine their work as art and as contributing to a "true picture of 55 Water Street, New York City". Among other revelations, her focus on the importance of daily maintenance activities uncovered inherent discrepancies of how these jobs are valued, or devalued in our society. Ukeles-Laderman, so sharply asks, "...The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"<sup>13</sup>

*Wheatfield-A Confrontation* (1982) was Agnes Denis' installation of a two acre wheat field in downtown Manhattan. With assistance, she removed trash, prepared the soil and planted seeds resulting in a lush amber crop that was harvested yielding 1,000 pounds of wheat. After the harvest, the fecund field was returned to a construction site

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<sup>13</sup> Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, ed., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 622.

for another luxury complex. Denis explained her actions, "My decision to plant a wheat field in Manhattan instead of building just another public sculpture grew out of a long-standing concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values."<sup>14</sup>

The idea of artist as facilitator of collaborative projects, defined by a given community's desires and needs, is a powerful contemporary notion. It is historically very recent and in direct opposition to the modernist view of aesthetics which encouraged separation of the artist from society. Suzy Gablik notes that the "modernist perspective of art for art's sake significantly removed art from any...social context or moral imperative...it crippled art's effectiveness and influence on the social world."<sup>15</sup> I contend that this is comparable to our separation from food production and processing. During the 20th century, particularly after World War II, most people became disconnected from agriculture and animal husbandry or hunting. The industrial revolution with its manufacturing processes were applied to food production and centralized massive monocultures became the norm. As a consequence, the "agri" has been separated from the "culture", just as art was separated from common culture. Perhaps it is appropriate that art and agricultural activities have been conjoined to bring both back into mainstream daily life. An important component of this evolution in thinking is the role of human as part of nature, not outside of it nor in opposition to it. Patricia Cato points out that "we

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<sup>14</sup> Stiles and Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 543.

<sup>15</sup> Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 76.



must reframe ourselves as human; we must consider how we are part of the environment, the society and our obligation to contribute, to be responsible."<sup>16</sup>

There is an expanding popular awareness about how we can reassess involvement with our mega-food system. Concerted movements are forming to support local diversified farming which can contribute to healthier local economies. While reality dictates that large industrial processing systems will not be dismantled, accessible alternatives are being expanded. There are many topics from which to choose regarding environmental problems; but, I believe that a return to more geographically diverse farming, based on polyculture, would contribute greatly to a healthier overall environment.

In 1981, Joseph Beuys emphatically pointed out in his "An Appeal for an Alternative ", that the ecological crisis is but one of many crises that we are facing:

"Our relation to nature is characterized by its having become thoroughly disturbed. There is the threat of total destruction of our fundamental natural basis. We are doing exactly what it takes to destroy the basis by putting into action an economic system which consists in unscrupulous exploitation of this natural basis. It has to be clearly spelled out that in this regard the capitalist economic system of the West is basically no different than that of the state capitalism of the East. The destruction is implemented on a world-wide scale. Between the mine and the garbage dump extends the one-way street of modern industrial civilization to whose expansive growth more and more lifelines and life cycles of the ecological systems are sacrificed."<sup>17</sup>

As I incorporate these concerns into my artistic practice, I also search for positive indicators and encouragement that change is possible. In *The Journal of Third World Studies*, David Carruther points out in "From Opposition to Orthodoxy: The Remaking of

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<sup>16</sup> Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> Stiles and Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 636.

Sustainable Development", that "the quest for sustainable design frequently takes place not at the level of state policy, but in local pockets of creativity...the homogenizing globalization...is being met from below with a countervailing force of myriad small resistances--local, diverse, sophisticated, and visionary."<sup>18</sup> This is a very hopeful perspective because it acknowledges the control that is possible by regular, everyday people and everyday actions.

Thomas Lyson would agree that corporate interests will continue to influence our food systems, especially with the fact of increasing globalization. However, he continues with a promising statement which also focuses on the power of individuals grouping together.

A new social blueprint for agriculture will come from below, not above. Civic engagement with the food system is taking place throughout the country as citizens and organizations grapple with providing food for the hungry, establishing community-based food businesses, and organizing food policy councils. Policies and programs at the local level that support the development of farmers' markets, CSAs, organic production, agricultural districts, community kitchens, community gardens, and all sorts of direct marketing and on-farm processing will foster a more community-friendly and sustainable system of production and consumption. While diverse, these efforts have one thing in common: they are all local problem-solving activities organized around agriculture and food.<sup>19</sup>

At one end of the everyday spectrum is the individual and, literally, the 'everyday'. At the other end of that spectrum is the global community, with all the 'community' in between. As an artist interested in community and social issues, a significant discovery for me has been learning that I must travel through the level of

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<sup>18</sup> David Carruthers, "From Opposition to Orthodoxy: The Remaking of Sustainable Development", *The Journal of Third World Studies*, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Lyson, *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food and Community* (Medford, MA: Tufts University Press, 2004, p. 103.

individual everydayness then spiral out to the greater everydayness of community to more critically assess and develop my body of work.

The artist can play an important social role in collaboration with community members and visionaries by encapsulating issues and promoting alternative perspectives. In addition, visual arts statements may be more effectively and legally employed as artistic expressions than other forms of communication. As highlighted in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, when the artist acts as facilitator, it can be a powerful force for helping to open avenues of expression and providing pathways for communities to define their own issues, how and what they want to say.

It is within the sphere of community-based agriculture and the many related connections that I hope to focus as an artist. This journey has also reassured me that my interest to have gallery exhibitions and work outside the cube are not mutually exclusive. Diversified venues can be supportive of work within the other.

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

Suzanne DeSaix received her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, (1978) and an Associates in Fine Arts from Northern Virginia Community College (1994). Prior to joining the graduate program, she worked as an independent artist and a substitute Teacher in the Loudoun County Public Schools. While living with her family in Tokyo (1999-2002), she was invited to participate with a Japanese art group focusing on painting and drawing. Before moving to Japan, she conducted her own program of fine arts classes in Loudoun County, Virginia. She has a professional background extending from the late 1970's into the mid-1990's, holding diverse positions such as a writer and arts management specialist in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); as a management analyst in the Office of the Comptroller, FEMA; and, as an animal technician at the National Zoological Park, Washington, DC and the Conservation and Research Center, Front Royal, VA.