Fleet: Nuances of Time and Ephemera

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Abstract

The following MFA thesis is an investigation into tendencies emphasizing permanency in both art, and to a lesser extent, daily living. By exploring ideas surrounding temporality, the ephemeral, and permanency in the studio and the gallery by working creatively with organic material and allowing it to decay naturally, I foreground ideas surrounding “life and death,” and the way they play out in art practices.

The thesis has been separated into three main chapters, the first one being an Extended Artist Statement where I elaborate on the research interests, artistic influences and material dedication that informed my project. Practice documentation is the focus of the next chapter, where I have compiled images of my work at various stages from the studio to the gallery. I also explain in some detail my decisions concerning experimentation and processes, and provide formal descriptions, titles, and dates. The final main chapter is an interview with Toronto-based artist Laurie Kang, where her practice, process, material choices, and her work that evolves within the gallery are the focus. These three components work alongside with my studio practice and MFA exhibition to question our desire for permanence, and how that desire influences our interactions with making and engaging with art.

Key Words: Temporality, Ephemera, Time-based, Installation, Materiality
Lay Summary

The following thesis chronicles my research that investigates why we desire permanence in the creation, and the engagement of art. The thesis has been separated into three main chapters, the first one being an Extended Artist Statement where I elaborate on my research interests, artistic influences and material dedication. In the second chapter, I have compiled images of my work at various stages from the studio to the gallery, and touch briefly on their creation process. The final chapter is an interview with Toronto-based artist Laurie Kang, where process and her work that evolves in the gallery is discussed.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................ ii
Lay Summary .................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................. v
Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Comprehensive Artist Statement .................................................................................... 3
  Materiality ....................................................................................................................... 3
  Doris Salcedo and Yolanda Gutiérrez ............................................................................ 6
  Conservation and Preservation ....................................................................................... 8

Legacy .............................................................................................................................. 10

On Mono no Aware and Ikebana, Wabi Sabi and Sentō Painters .................................... 11

Mono no Aware and Ikebana ............................................................................................ 12

Wabi Sabi and Sentō Painters ......................................................................................... 14

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 15

Practice Documentation ................................................................................................. 15

Practice, Process and Evolving in the Gallery ................................................................ 35
  An Interview with Laurie Kang....................................................................................... 35

Bibliography .................................................................................................................... 49

Curriculum Vitae .............................................................................................................. 50
Introduction

The following thesis dossier has been written to accompany my MFA thesis exhibition, *Fleet*. The written components of the dossier are divided into three sections: an Extended Artist Statement; Studio Practice Documentation; and an Interview with Artist Laurie Kang.

In the Extended Artist Statement, I elaborate on the motivations that have informed my practice and research. This document is an extended reflection on our relationship with the intention of permanency in art, by drawing together different research ideas and commentaries on works by artists. It also explains the decision-making that led to approaching these ideas by creating work that is impossible to preserve. The statement begins by addressing the ephemeral materials and process-based commitments I have been working with as an artist over an extended period, and the significance these things hold for this project. I briefly touch upon the way my studio practice has shifted over the past two years, as there were major changes throughout my MFA candidacy. Following this, I speak briefly about two artists, Doris Salcedo and Yolanda Gutiérrez, because of the similarities regarding the material commitments within their work, with respect to each other's work and my own. A major consideration when working with ephemeral material is choosing between preserving the work, or, instead, allowing it to degrade naturally. Reflecting on Salcedo’s and Gutiérrez’s decision making in this regard highlighted different approaches to these questions.

Following that discussion, I elaborate specifically on conservation and preservation from the perspective of my own studio practice, and I establish how I prioritized the temporal nature of the work with respect to the longer terms of my aesthetic project. The next section is dedicated to ideas of legacy and to questioning where our desire to leave behind proof of our existence comes from, and how this affects our interactions with art, both in its creation and its viewing. The final section reflects on two different Japanese aesthetic ideologies, Mono no Aware and Wabi Sabi, where I draw connections between those practices and the temporal nature of my art practice and research. All of the foregoing components are wrapped up with a brief conclusion.
The Studio Practice Documentation is the second section, which features images that chronicle work from the exhibition, prototypes from the studio development of the project, as well as a series of earlier trials, processes, and experiments. Images of the exhibition during installation are included to further aid in showing the evolving nature of much of the work. In addition to this, there are brief descriptions and evidence of process and regarding what I categorize as ‘failed’ experiments.

The third and final section is an interview with Laurie Kang, a Toronto-based artist. I was able to meet with her virtually in Summer 2020, where we spent some time discussing her practice, engagements with process, and decision making. Much of Kang’s works’ themes revolve around the body, but her material and process interventions are something I deeply admired, as her work is still often in a state of evolution within the gallery.

The three major sections of this dossier illustrate the experimentation, research, and creation I completed during the past two years, questioning how exactly the pursuit of physical permanency affects our experiences with art and life. I consider that, ideally, this dossier and exhibition are merely a starting point for a continuing body of work, and perhaps a way of thinking about life.
Comprehensive Artist Statement

Time passes by whether we want it to or not. It is an aspect of life we truly have no control over. Seasons change, years pass, things age, things die. It would be fair to say that many people are concerned to some degree with what they are leaving behind, and what the proof of their existence will be.

My interests as an artist primarily revolve around engaging with ideas of legacy and permanence by creating time-based works with ephemeral materials. While time-based work is commonly categorized as new media, my practice deviates from this typical association. With the focus of my practice being the visible and tangible passage of time, indexed to unique time signatures and rhythms of multiple different elements, duration is a valuable means by which to point to regarding this distinction. Working with an ephemeral, yet materially focused practice, I ask, “Why do we strive for permanence? Does this change how we interact with art and how are we able to make peace with the fleeting nature of life?”

Given such questions that point to a potentially large scope of inquiry, I have chosen to narrow my research interests to investigate specific ideologies and practices that function in an analogous way. These research preoccupations are separated into five sections in the following discussion, which illustrate how a range of interests, questions, and problems come together to inform my studio practice.

Materiality

Materiality and material connotations are an aspect of my practice upon which I place a high value. I think that material decisions can impart significant meaning and impact onto artistic outputs. Working with ephemeral materials allow my work to apparently follow its own natural life cycle, allowing it to reflect upon the idea of the self or even on ‘ourselves/myself’, in some significant way. At an early stage of my program, the works I was creating, based on these ideas, were made out of fabric, and each form was subjected to various processes, asserting new

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1 “Ephemeral art often involves works that do not exist in a steady state but change or decay slowly.” Mary O’Neill, “Ephemeral Art: Mourning and Loss”. (Loughborough University, 2007), 4.
iterations that brought new ‘life’ to the work. But ultimately, the viewer’s access to the old forms ostensibly ‘immersed’ within the works became lost – in order for a new form to come into being. At various intervals, the works went through a series of births, or ‘rebirths.’ The ever-changing works in my studio created new objects, and also inferred new situations of ‘loss’. My process of re-‘presenting’ the same materials, re-utilized as new forms, prompted questions of how we remember an original, albeit lost form.

A key issue with the work I was doing was that fabric – the textile, was in fact quite durable, and despite all the labour that was put into my forms, and the stresses they were put under, they became no closer to dematerialization than they had been when I started.

In light of the foregoing, I eventually determined that a shift to organic materials was necessary to my work. Ultimately, flowers and flower petals, were introduced for their capacity to signal a high level of significance regarding the aspect of ‘loss’ in my work that I had come to realize is so important to me.

The flowers I introduced into my practice were purchased from a local distributor, who had deemed the bundles I acquired to be ‘unsellable’ to florists, due to decay or imperfections they had. So, the flowers I chose to work with were destined for the dumpster. Due to this means of acquiring my materials, when I began to work with the flowers, I had little to no say concerning the colour or type of flower I was able to deploy.

Implicitly, the moment such flowers are picked for a distributor, they begin to die, so it felt to me to be partly a work of ‘mercy’ to give them a chance to fulfill their acculturated purpose as flowers bred for aesthetic reasons alone, and also, arguably, an act of ‘cruelty,’ to subject a material that was otherwise going to dematerialize peacefully, to what might be thought of as ‘hard labour.’ Here, I note that the notion of an empathic feeling towards the materials used by artists will be further elaborated upon in later sections of this statement.

_Drying, Dried_ (2021) is a wall installation that utilizes flower petals by removing them from the pistil and meticulously nailing each petal onto the wall according to a predetermined pattern, into
clustered round forms. Once installed, the petals are not protected, and are left to decay according to their natural rate, and then more clusters are added throughout the exhibition. With the rolling installation and decay occurring uncontrollably, viewers experience a different moment in the life (or death) of the work, depending on the time of their viewing in relation to the ‘life’ of the work. Or, instead, we could say that they encounter just a single sliver of time in *Drying, Dried*’s durational system, while still encountering the work as contemplative and slow. In combination with this, *Undulate* (2021) was a performance piece that makes use of leftover flowers that dried up too much to include in *Drying, Dried*.

Constantly fighting against time and decay in my studio often left me surrounded by flowers that had dried before I was able to use them. For me, there was a lot of guilt that came with the potential wastefulness of this fact, because of the nature of the project. So, in order to better utilize my supplies, I laboriously ground the petals into a fine dust. I then would proceed to rub the dust directly onto the wall with my fingers to draw a fragile image of waves. Without the addition of any liquid, the dust is simply resting on the wall and would eventually fall to the ground with a slight brushing or breeze. My move to performance, with *Undulate*, was intended to ensure that there would be different time-based moments of accessibility for viewers with my project.

The works within my installations are always operating at various stages of their own duration, and some are ‘re-set’ at various moments throughout, to ensure there is a natural rhythmic cycle to the exhibition. The exhibition itself can function like its own ecosystem with regard to the various created or implied ‘life cycles’; how one aspect hands off its materiality to other aspects, as things decay, as well as regarding how the works exist separately and in tandem with each other.

To work with the impermanence of ephemeral materials is to allow the passage of time to play a significant role in the production of the work. In many ways, time becomes both a material determinant of the work, as well as a collaborator in the making of the work itself. *Fleet* invokes a sensitivity and empathy towards ephemera and the natural cycles of life. The works enact
processes of decay and deterioration, engaging with natural cycles directly as opposed to illustratively.

Doris Salcedo and Yolanda Gutiérrez

With the notion and the ‘reality’ of time playing a prominent role in how the work I was creating had come to function, I began to look at other artists who allow the play and the evidence of time to be present in their work. Doris Salcedo and Yolanda Gutiérrez are two artists whose material choices are significant and reflective in relation to my studio practice, or present aspects that operate in contrast with it.

Salcedo is a Colombian-born sculptural artist engaging with sociopolitical concerns, and with materiality and time as concepts. One of the works she created, A Flor de Pie (2012-13) uses ephemeral material as a vehicle to impart meaning with respect to the experience of the viewer. As stated in the book, The Materiality of Mourning, “(Salcedo) relies on materials to impart emotional weight.”2 While Salcedo’s work is conceptually very different from my own studio practice, her material choices present some similar questions about the work’s physical status. With A Flor de Pie, Salcedo had sewn together thousands of rose petals into a large textile-like work, in order to represent victims of a local tragedy. A Flor de Pie is not intended to be a lasting work; Salcedo created it as a memorial piece that decomposed the same way the deceased victims of the local tragedy had.

In Mary Schneider Enriquez’ The Materiality of Mourning, the author describes the work as follows; “With time, she [Salcedo] has chosen increasingly delicate and ephemeral materials to render the trace of the absent body, expressing the fragile threads of the victims’ past through similarly impermanent materials. A Flor de Pie allows the ephemeral, the temporality of mind and material, to endure.”3

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2 Mary Schneider Enriquez, The Materiality of Mourning, 119.
3 Mary Schneider Enriquez, The Materiality of Mourning, 121.
Time does not always appear in Salcedo’s work as a collaborator, but she sometimes, instead, tries to illustrate it. This illustrative approach to time can be seen in an earlier work entitled *Abyss* (2005). The installation is an almost fully bricked over interior space, involving the covering of all doors, entrances, and windows. The only functioning entrance is where the bricks stop wrapping around the space, leaving a small opening at the bottom of a doorway for viewers and participants to crawl through. Nothing in this particular work would adhere to the definition of something ephemeral or temporal, but instead, the artist tries to captivate viewers with a sense of ‘duration.’ Schneider Enríquez writes, “This space projected the literal, material weight of time, not only in relation to its 18th-century history as a site of confinement, but also as measured by the dense curtain of bricks Salcedo constructed to entomb the room, shutting out the light, obstructing the entrance, and detaining life inside.”

Utilizing time as a concept, in addition to treating time as a material collaborator, undoubtedly plays a role in my practice, as well. While my materials are subjected to the passage of time, conceptually, time itself is significant in numerous other ways. So, a layering of material, material collaboration, and concepts regarding materiality itself are intended to deepen the impact and thicken the potential for understanding regarding my work.

Yolanda Gutiérrez is a Mexican artist whose work engages with environmentalism, and who works with a variety of organic material. She questions the need for an art object itself by making use of ephemerality. Interestingly, through her practice, Gutiérrez became invested in the land art movement. To bring this artist into the orbit of my interests, I want to briefly introduce

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4 “Time operates in two ways in Salcedo’s practice: as a reference to a discrete moment or instant (usually the occurrence of a violent act) and as an extended, unending state, the condition one experience when living with the uncertainty of political violence” Mary Schneider Enríquez, *The Materiality of Mourning*, 90.

5 “Micke Bal associates this aspect of Salcedo’s work with the concept of ‘duration’: the time required to approach, study closely, and read the details visible on the object at close range.” Mary Schneider Enríquez, *The Materiality of Mourning*, 86.

6 Mary Schneider Enríquez, *The Materiality of Mourning*, 90.

7 “Yolanda Gutiérrez is one of the pioneers of the ecological installations in Mexico…. Linking nature and deity, using unconventional materials, and questioning the need of the art object, she favours the possibility of the ephemeral and transitory.” Rosario Llamas-Pacheco, *The Ephemeral, the Essential and the Material in the Conservation of Contemporary Art: Decision-Making for the Conservation of a Work Made with Butterfly Wings*, 444.
one of her works and its material qualities and expand upon the significance this brings to my discussion in a later section. *Efímeras* (2002) is an installation Yolanda Gutiérrez created for the Art Fund of the Polytechnic University of Valencia in Spain. The installation adhered butterfly wings to agave thorns in order to form what looks like a flower shape. Twelve of these butterfly wing flowers sit on a bed of actual dried flowers. To produce the piece, the artist attached the wings to cellulose acetate in order to better preserve them. This work was originally shown in a temporary exhibition in 2006 in Mexico. Inevitably, with much of the material being either ephemeral or exceedingly delicate, the conservation and preservation of the elements within the work had to be considered, and so, deserve analysis in this discussion.

Conservation and Preservation

An inherent problem when creating work that dematerializes or is meant to draw attention to notions of dematerialization, is the issue of preservation for exhibition purposes. When the work itself decays, there are few options as to how to handle the question of showing the work more than once. Referring specifically to the flower petals being used in my recent work, I note that with my projects, once the petals have dried and curled up in exhibition, they become so fragile that even the smallest movement can destroy them. Of course, the pieces could be collected and ostensibly maintained, but they would not be able to be returned to the form they previously held. That said, the essence of such pieces lies in their temporal aspects: their being subject to the decaying process; something that happens in the gallery and in the world itself. To preserve these works in some fashion seems counterintuitive with respect to the integrity of the concept of the work, and to handle them in such a way that seeming ‘natural’ material devolution is interfered with seems disingenuous as well. For some time, even the notion of photographing the work and having physical evidence by way of the image felt inauthentic. Eventually, the decision was made that, if the essence of the art was in the time-based nature of its physicality, then documenting what is simply a physical vessel for decay or growth is not counterintuitive or dishonest to the original intention.

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Gutiérrez’s Efímeras (2002), a small sculptural installation made from agave thorns and butterfly wings that took form as flowers, prompted similar questions—how should the work be shown in future exhibitions? Do you prioritize the integrity of the concept or integrity of the aesthetic delivery? Where do we locate the ‘truth’ of the art? After the installation was donated to the Polytechnic University of Valencia, which had commissioned its creation, and years had passed, it became apparent that there would need to be interventions of some sort due to the work’s decay and dematerializing process. Fortunately, the museum was able to consult with the artist to respect and uphold her artistic integrity regarding the specific work, but the situation serves as an important case study regarding dying materials and intervention. Gutiérrez and the Polytechnic University of Valencia worked together to come to the decision to restore certain aspects of the work when needed. Rosario Llamas-Pacheco elaborates on the process and decision making, in his article, “The Ephemeral, the Essential and the Material in the Conservation of Contemporary Art: Decision-Making for the Conservation of a Work Made with Butterfly Wings”, as follows:

Like other works by the same artist, Efímeras is primarily an installation, not only a material work of art. Efímeras is not ephemeral, although some of its matter is… because the work of art is not only embodied in this material, but it also consists of all those perceived sensory experiences after installation. …the contrast between the new and the old will be produced. … This contrast is essential to the work, as is clear from the interpretation of the object. … But at what point does the natural degradation of the materials affect the significance of the work? … At this point of the decision-making process, we know what the work of art is, we know what condition it is in, we know what the work means, and what essential aspects should be transmitted from generation to generation.10

It is clear to me that a significant aspect of the decision to restore particular components of the work in question was based on the desire to maintain the contrast between more lively, or ‘living’ elements, and elements in an advanced state of decay. Choosing to place importance on one aspect over another makes sense, as it seems that with such a tension between ‘living and dying’, priorities need to be established. However, reading that in the case of this particular work, importance was placed on the contrast of particular elements, further informs my own decision to not restore or make a concentrated effort to maintain my works, as I want to place a

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priority on the natural life cycle of the materials; to restore them would undermine my own intentions and decision-making processes in creating these works in the first place.

Legacy

How do we navigate any memory, or the depiction of life when life itself is so temporary, and any physical reminder of it will eventually dematerialize as well\(^\text{11}\)? For as long as I can remember, I have been preoccupied with the idea of after and afterwards. This notion of after can mean multiple things: Posthumously, what am I leaving behind? Or what am I not leaving behind? The other aspect of after in this sense could involve the hereafter, or potential lack thereof. How do our memories of things change when they no longer exist? Why do we try so hard to preserve things when we are going to meet the same fate as those objects, as well – and perhaps more quickly after we die?

Perhaps these preoccupations could be traced back to my relatively secular upbringing, or in combination with my deep-seated need for explainable, measurable answers. Yet, it would be dishonest to say there hasn’t been a degree of existential trepidation, and fear of the unknown informing and guiding these questions.

Turning to psychology for what would hopefully be a definitive answer, I have looked into different theories concerning palliative care and coping. While there are no definitive answers on how to cope with the inevitable prospect of death, researchers have compiled a comprehensive list of things that they believe attribute to dying peacefully. Leaving behind what you may feel is an adequate legacy is a topic that comes up in many of these theories. Erik Erikson references this in his “Eight Stages of Development Theory”,\(^\text{12}\) and multiple studies following after him

\(^{11}\) Of course, some elect to be buried in durable and more permanent vessels to combat this but universally the point still stands that in the absolute grand scheme everything has potential to dematerialize.

\(^{12}\) “Generativity vs. Stagnation. Psychologically, generativity refers to "making your mark" on the world through creating or nurturing things that will outlast an individual. During middle age individuals experience a need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often having mentees or creating positive changes that will benefit other people. Ego Integrity vs. Despair. It is during this time that we contemplate our accomplishments and can develop integrity if we see ourselves as leading a successful life.” Saul Mcleod “Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development.” Simply Psychology. May 2018. https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html.
Karen Kehl explains in “An Analysis of the Concept of a Good Death”, that one’s approach to the end of their own life often places additional value on leaving something behind, whether that be a physical, social, or financial legacy.\textsuperscript{13}

Fundamentally, I identify with this: there is something inherently human about wanting to be remembered, a compulsion to leave our mark on the world. In a related way, I want to carve my name into trees and make sure there was proof of my existence. Despite ‘getting’ this on an emotional level, there is a deep-rooted frustration about it for me at the same time— why do I feel these compulsions? Would my time not be better spent worrying about the present, instead of a future when or perhaps where we no longer exist?

Maybe these questions are why I have felt compelled to make art in the first place. Despite understanding this, my approach to my current studio practice has come to be in direct opposition with many of these stated sentiments. I think my work now reflects our own life cycle, and the decaying materials allow it to continue developing on its own without my hand interfering. A more traditional work, such as a painting, when installed in the gallery, would remain in a fixed, finished state. In the case of my work, my hand is eventually removed from the process in the studio and the work is given over to the passage of time to continue with its life cycle, even after installation. My practice operates in direct opposition of ‘leaving a physical legacy’; this has pointed me towards ideas and ideologies that hold similar values.

On Mono no Aware and Ikebana, Wabi Sabi and Sentō Painters

The Japanese developed a distinct sense of aesthetics, including wabi sabi, mono no aware, and ma, to guide their feelings in regard to nature and its influence in their art and culture. Each of these aesthetics depicts a different kind of beauty, often describing beauty found in unexpected forms. Wabi sabi represents rustic and desolate beauty; mono no aware, a fleeting, varying beauty; ma, an empty or formless beauty. By defining

\textsuperscript{13} “This attribute was especially important in the perspectives of elders on a good death. It included leaving behind an emotional, physical, financial, or social legacy. The issue of being remembered was also seen as very important, and the issue of how one was remembered by others was a component of this attribute”
beauty through these aesthetics, Japan has generated an awareness of the beauty of nature not typically found in other societies, especially in sprawling urban settings.\textsuperscript{14}

The previous sections of this statement highlight the questions I have that have directed me to creating the type of work that I am producing in my studio. Through related reading and research, I have become aware that various elements of certain Japanese practices and influences could be considered as moving towards an answer to my questions. However, to say ‘answer’ could be too definitive. Perhaps, by referring to my questions as unsolvable problems, these ideologies can serve more as pillars for contemplation, meditation, or maybe even as coping mechanisms.

As I delve into this area, I will be breaking up particular areas of thought, practice, and influence into subsections. They are the aesthetics and principles of Mono no Aware and ikebana, as well as a brief look at wabi sabi and sentō painters.

**Mono no Aware and Ikebana**

Possessing or describing the feelings associated with mono no aware … can be difficult, as the emotion associated with the object changes as the situation varies. Thus, one must constantly adapt to the changing feeling in the object, which ultimately heightens the participant’s sensitivity for finding the beauty in mono no aware. One may feel a sense of joy at the sight of a beautiful, full blossom of sakura. In a few hours or days, however, that blossom may have already wilted or fallen to the ground. The observer must remember each component of this process…. The beauty lies not in the object itself, but in the whole experience, transformation, and span of time in which the object is present and change.\textsuperscript{15}

For me, there is an experiential truth in recognizing that it can be difficult to describe the feelings associated with these concepts. There is a very specific, but fleeting sense of beauty associated with an aesthetic of allowing something to pass on, on its own time. It is almost as though there is an empathetic connection the object acquires with a perceiver, regarding its status as a thing in our world and an artwork. The final line of the previous quote sums up why I

\textsuperscript{14} Lauren Prusinski, *Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics Through Japanese History*, 1.

believe there is significance to collaborating with time and decay, as well as with choosing not to engage with any sort of preservative measures. Much of the experience for the viewer is within the slowly changing state and knowing that the time spent with the work will be the only time possible to spend with the work.

Ikebana is the art of floral arrangement, which lends itself to the ideology of Mono no Aware. Ikebana can be defined as literally ‘‘making flowers live’’— a strange name, on first impression at least, for an art that begins by initiating their death.”16 The citing of the strangeness of the name is worth noting for its sensitivity towards the flower’s prospective and inevitable death. These flowers are chosen, cut from the earth to sit in an equally carefully chosen vase in order for them to be taken care of. From there, they will open and bloom, showing their beauty, all the while slowly dying. Buddhist thought suggests that this practice makes the flowers show their truest selves from this practice. Graham Parkes and Adam Loughnane write in Japanese Aesthetics that from the Buddhist point of view on cutting flowers for aesthetics, that despite plants being ‘at home’ wherever they are (by the very nature of being literally rooted in spot), one is allowing the plant to reflect themselves: rootless and dying.17 This sensitivity that encourages one to appreciate the beauty of the flower and its limited time is the same sensitivity that allows someone to effectively ‘kill’ or begin the initial action of ‘killing’ a flower. Flowers are an excellent vehicle for Mono no Aware, for this exact reason, yet I had not initially gravitated towards them with this in mind. It wasn’t until certain moments in the studio prompted different ways of unintentionally personifying the flowers that I started to become aware of my empathy towards these inanimate objects. As has been mentioned in a previous section, I wondered if it was more merciful to allow the flowers to die when they were intended to be thrown out, or if I was giving them a second chance at a ‘new life.’ They had already been cut from the ground, and they were going to decompose regardless, but choosing to engage with and


appreciate all their various stages towards their decomposition is ultimately bittersweet and complicated.

Wabi Sabi and Sentō Painters

Wabi sabi can be defined as “an aesthetic ideal and philosophy that is best understood in terms of Zen philosophy. … Wabi sabi embodies the Zen nihilist cosmic view and seeks beauty in the imperfections found, as all things, in a constant state of flux, evolve from nothing and devolve back to nothing.”\(^\text{18}\) The artists who paint inside the Japanese sentō create their paintings knowing that the steam and humidity from the bathhouse will inevitably destroy their work. Once the painting is considered unenjoyable, a painter returns to paint on top of the old art.\(^\text{19}\)

There are currently only three known sentō painters carrying on this particular type of work today, one being Kiyoto Maruyama. Regardless of Maruyama knowing of the fate of his labour, he continues the tradition onward. He commented in an interview on the ephemeral nature of these paintings in a simple manner, “While this is sad, it also has a uniquely Japanese romantic feel to it.”\(^\text{20}\)

Mizuki Tanaka was an art history student studying depictions of Mount Fuji who fell into looking closer at the sentō paintings as well, and eventually found herself working as an apprentice for Morio Nakajima, one of the other last few sentō painters. Eventually she worked up to being a master painter as well. In an interview with Alex Martin she states, “Unlike one-off paintings, we return to our clients every few years to repaint murals weathered from the steam and humidity. That gives us a chance to observe our growth in craftsmanship while letting us learn about each locale…In a sense, our work is never ending, and I find that fascinating.”\(^\text{21}\)


\(^\text{19}\) “Since the murals are always in contact with hot water and exposed to bright lights and sunlight, the colours fade and the paint tends to peel quickly. Because of this, they are repainted every three to four years, and each new painting goes over the previous one. In other words, this artwork is fated to disappear.” 


Creating work that is inevitably going to be destroyed, in this case by its environment, clearly feels deeply poetic. The paintings themselves are not necessarily engaging with ideas about their ‘own’ mortality, and yet they reflect their own life cycle anyway. Of course, in any cultural context, people can also choose not to engage with the concept of our own mortality, but then doesn’t an attempt to leave something permanent behind become completely counterintuitive?

Conclusion

By utilizing ephemeral materials or practices in the studio and collaborating with the passage of time, my work intends to question the meaning of permanency in art. I do this by making my work as an impermanent entity, also recognizing the performative aspects of the works’ changing state and life cycle within the gallery. Making use of what had been deemed ‘commercially undesirables’ flowers, and the passage of time and the allowance for natural decay, the work is able to invoke similarities to something akin to our human experience. This creates a reflective moment allowing viewers to be contemplative and potentially attend to the inherent beauty of the ceaseless movement of time. In this, we can reflect on our own desires for permanency in art making and art viewing, as well as in our own lives and regarding our potential legacies. Drawing references and research ideas from varying fields, ideologies and artists, my practice informs myself and viewers about some of the inherent issues and problematics that relate to the fascination with striving for permanence or impermanence in art.

Practice Documentation

My practice has shown several significant changes over the past two years during my MFA. The following documentation begins by illustrating the evolution of my processes and
production during this time. I have also included images from my thesis exhibition that were taken over the course of the installation, and during the first two weeks the exhibition was open. The decision to include both the installation process and approximately two weeks of documentation was taken to ensure a substantial representation of the process and of the time-based nature of the show. Titles, materials, and production explanations are included here with the documentation.

The starting point for my interest in temporal and evolving work arose with my interest in art that doesn’t continue to exist in a fixed state, like a palimpsest. Initially, I worked with the idea of palimpsest by creating new iterations of old ‘completed’ work, in ways that irrevocably prevented a material from returning to its previous state. At this point, I was working almost exclusively with fabric, and I was altering it by using adhesives, plaster of paris, and wax to change the integrity of the material and the way it would physically take up space.

While working this way, my interests developed further towards questions of temporality. It felt to me that ‘temporality’ would need to be considered through a passive progression in the work and not something that I was physically manipulating behind the scenes. If the development became the point of interest, this would need to be an aspect of the work I would let viewers experience.

These realizations prompted what felt like an enormous material shift: to working mainly with flowers. As mentioned in my comprehensive artist statement, the flowers were purchased from a local distributor who sold me discounted flowers (typically carnations) that had been deemed ‘unfit for sale to florists.’ This shift was a turning point in my studio practice as the transformation of the work would be happening mostly in the gallery, as opposed to the studio. Another advantage of the organic material of the flowers was the fact that they would dematerialize beyond further use.
The documentation of the installation progress here shows how I negotiated space, time, and material in the gallery, since working with dying material often demands compromise. This documentation extends past the installation process to show the passive evolution of the works during the first two weeks when the show was completed and ‘presented’. Due to the current pandemic, the documentation is also supplemented with video documentation.

Image 1 Cyanotypes i & ii (Iteration i), Cyanotype on fabric. 2019.

Images 1–4 show the same cyanotypes in the different forms they took over the course of a year. The starting point for making a cyanotype came from my desire to explore the connection between palimpsests and indexes. The ‘image’ was developed onto the fabric with cyanotype by leaving the folds in the fabric to create shadows, so it functioned like a photograph of itself. Later, it was secured to plaster mounds that I created as structures specifically for each one. The next photograph shows one of the cyanotypes after it had been soaked in melted wax and draped over a wooden chair, and then removed once the wax cured. Lastly, the fourth image is a detail shot of the cyanotype fabric after its folds, created from being hung over the chair, were pulled apart and flattened as much as possible, creating white cracks in the wax.

Similar to the first four images, the materials from images 5-7 all feature the same fabric in different iterations. Originally, it was hand-dyed, soaked in melted wax, and then hung over a structure in order to dry and maintain the upward-moving shape that is visible in image 5. Image 6 shows the same materials from image 5, after all of the folds had been broken apart, with the wax ripple cracked across the fabric creating the illusion of a paler blue. Despite trying to re-flatten it, the fabric had been irreparably stretched from when it had been hung to dry, leaving a peak visible in the centre of Image 6. Any intervention I made would not be able to return it to its pre-waxed state. The final image (Image 7) shows the last iteration this material went through, being folded into a rectangle that leans against the gallery wall. This was one of the final works made before the shift to organic material.

*Grid* was one of the first experiments I did with the flowers. I had been dedicated to finding a way to allow the passive decay of them to be an accessible experience. While thinking about pinned archival butterflies, I chose to use something with more visual weight to it and decided on the small nails seen in Image 8 and 9. *Grid* served as a prototype for a larger version entitled *Drying, Dried* that was featured in the exhibition. That work will be addressed further later.
In pursuit of further experimentation and in desperation to not allow my flowers to go to waste, I began blending the petals in water, and then to press them with a sponge onto pellon. As the individual components dry, they curl and pull off the pellon, creating a delicate, ephemeral, organic form.

**Image 11 Untitled** [detail shot of studio experiment with dried water-pressed blended flowers]

Originally, I had tried to give some sort of form or shape to these ‘flower sheets’ I had made and aimed to achieve this by laying the sheets to dry on top of objects to dry with the imprint of their
shape. After the experiment results were not desirable, I tried stitching them together into a cylindrical form, shown in Image 12.

The form of *Cylinder* felt too heavy-handed and narrative in relation to the way the rest of the work was developing, so in preparation for the exhibition, the thread was removed, and I kept the individual sheets to work with in the gallery.


*Press* was the final approach with the dried flower sheets, now sitting separated from each other on two light boxes. The sheets are arranged to be in conversation with the work diagonal to it (*Drying, Dried*), so the spacing of the sheets increases in size across the light boxes. The sheets are presented as delicate, archival objects, despite their preservation being impossible, because of their extreme fragility and organic structure.
**Image 14 Falling** [Studio Prototype], Reclaimed flowers, thread. 2021.

**Image 15 Falling** [Exhibition Version], Reclaimed flowers, thread. 2021.
Falling stitches petal clusters onto thread that are hung with enough space to comfortably maneuver through them. There is nothing that fixes the petals in their spot on the string, and as they dry and are agitated by movement in the studio or gallery, the petals slide down the string. At different stages, the petals may be spread relatively evenly as they fall down, but the work begins with them all in a cluster suspended about nine feet in the air. Eventually most, if not all, of the petals end up dried and at the end of their string, or on the ground in the gallery that is visible in Image 16.


Image 20 *Drying, Dried* [Complete, Exhibition Version], Reclaimed flowers, nails. 2021.
*Drying, Dried* was developed from the prototype version of *Grid* mentioned previously. *Drying, Dried* features a 1-inch-by-1-inch grid marked with graphite, and then individual petals are nailed into the grid to dry out and decompose on the wall over the course of the exhibition. The detached wall is approximately 16 feet by 8 feet by 2 feet and the grid and flowers cover all sides, with *Falling* being supported by the back side of *Drying, Dried*, shown in the next image. With the installation requiring a multi-day process, the petals nailed on during the first few days end up being much further along in their decomposition process than the fresh ones, creating a gradient in the liveliness of the work. The density of the nails and petals tapers out towards the bottom of the structure, leaving the drawing of the 1-inch-by-1-inch dotted grid visible on its own.

Practice, Process and Evolving in the Gallery
An Interview with Laurie Kang

Laurie Kang is a Toronto based artist whose work generally focuses on themes surrounding the body, utilizing installations of photography, sculpture and video. I had been introduced to Kang’s work during a studio visit earlier in the year with another Toronto-based artist, Janine Marsh, while discussing the idea of morphing and continually changing art as finished work. Several of Kang’s installations had included material that she had referred to as “continually sensitive photography”, and this had been of immediate interest to me. These works appeared to be partially evolved in the studio, and then installed in the gallery where they continued developing and reacting to the space around them. Asides from these sensitive pieces, Kang’s materiality, intuitive process and site responsiveness were things that I was eager to ask more about. We were able to meet through a Zoom video call at the beginning of July 2020, to discuss her work, concepts, and process. Our discussion appears in the following transcript, along with additional commentary I interjected after reflection. While our practices lack similarity in their respective overarching themes, the execution of process, and the use and personification of materials seemed to be where a correspondence existed.

Throughout the following interview Laurie Kang speaks about her studio as though it is an extension of herself, and about her work, as well, as a personified, separate entity. Maintaining this entity appears to be as much a step in her process as researching, conceptualizing and physically creating.

The language that Kang uses to speak about her work truly makes it anthropomorphic. She often explains how the work had ‘lived’ in a particular space, which brings a life to it in a different way than if she were to say, ‘the work had been exhibited in this way,’ etc. I think that material intention can lend additional meaning to works, and the language that we surround work with (in discussion, or description) does this just as much. Post-production work affects interpretation, in addition to studio creation and exhibiting. The inflection that a description involving words such as ‘sensitive’, as mentioned, personifies the work so much more than when it was referred to in
an objective manner that assumes its static character. Ways of sharing, discussing and documenting the work serve as a means of extending the impact of the original.

Prior to our meeting we exchanged brief email correspondences, where I had shared a summary of my research in order to provide context for Kang, which is thus referenced in the interview. The written summary I provided is as follows:

I am researching theories regarding palimpsests and indexes (in studio practice and in the gallery) by utilizing ephemeral/temporal material or material qualities in sculptures. This is through material choice, usage, dematerialization and re-usage. Regarding ephemerality, to further narrow down what does and does not fall under what I am considering ephemeral for this research, Mary O’Neill’s definition works great as a starting point, “Ephemeral art often involves works that do not exist in a steady state but change or decay slowly.”

Noting that “change or decay” is an important distinction, as this would include many works that move across a grey area between the ephemeral and the temporal. Ephemeral materials ensure the slow change of the work over time; where materials are not ephemeral, dematerialization, and re-working lends themselves to the theory and ideas of the palimpsest. I am interested in the way sculptural artworks become indexes of experience, methods and process. Do we need to regard art works as things requiring physical permanency anymore, when the prospect of dematerialization does not detract from the impact, purpose or expression of the object? The ever-changing work in the studio creates new objects and also invokes situations of loss. Re-showing the same materials re-utilized in new forms asks how we remember the original, lost form.

While the concepts I initially had been engaging with were often shifting, the specific materials were not. Completed works and previously used materials were constantly re-investigated, reused and transformed. When I labelled a work ‘finished’ or ‘ready for the gallery’, the state of ‘finished’ was still not necessitating that those materials and shapes must transform the work into a permanent fixture. The moment of being ‘finished’ was continuous. Some of my initial pieces were intended to be constantly transforming while in the gallery due to their temporal nature, so their state of ‘finished’ was under constant change. This is something I plan to continuously engage with as the work develops, embracing the inevitability that the work will eventually be dematerialized and re-utilized is important. By reworking and dematerializing old once ‘finished’ works, the works bear indexes of their previous forms. The continually changing states make the single objects into palimpsests. As specific materials and works dematerialize beyond further use, new materials will be introduced to ensure a continuous practice.

Despite this being the document I originally sent to Laurie back in the summer of 2020, my practice has continued to shift in the past year. These changes were primarily in material choices, and I believe much of the sentiment from this interview still holds true.

**Rebecca Sutherland: Could we begin with a brief background of yourself and your work?**

Laurie Kang: Sure, I am an artist, I have a background in studio arts and photography. For my undergrad I started in studio arts, so I have a background in painting and sculpture – even some textile work. But then about halfway through, or just over halfway into my undergrad I switched to a photography major but was still doing painting and sculpture all the way through. I say that to preface that what feels natural to me is practicing multiple mediums at once. When I look at my history, I realize I started with a very tactile interest in art, and then ended up doing photography, which is not at all not tactile, but has a different kind of approach. So just to say, my practice is one that is somewhat hybrid, and more and more (with) some of the works I make, I intentionally try to blur the lines between whether this is sculpture, site responsive installation, architectural intervention, (or) support for artwork, and I’m interested in blurring all of those boundaries. General themes of my work are usually surrounding the body without necessarily having the literal body explicitly present, but more so traces of the body, debris of the body, whether that's imagined or actual, and then also the body as reconfigured in spatial manifestations. Whether it's a wall installation or something (based on) thinking about the collapsing of body and environment, and how those two mutually constitute each other.

**RS: What would a ‘typical’ day in the studio look like for you?**

LK: There isn’t necessarily a typical one as I practice more, and I think every artist figures out their own routine and that is such an important part of art making; to engage with what actually works for you as an artist. For me, so much of my work happens in the studio, but a lot of it happens outside of the studio, like the walk to the studio – the journey getting there is just as, if not more, important than literally being there. For example, in this Corona (virus) moment, there was a good month where I didn’t go to my studio and I had to reconcile with that. With still having studio days without being in my studio. So, I’m not somebody who needs ten hours a day
in my studio, but I definitely need the mental and emotional space to think and to process. So, I take a lot of walks, and then when I do go to the studio, it really varies; some days I’m in there for two hours, and some days eight hours. I try to listen and let my body lead: “this is what you need today, and this is what you don’t need today”. So (my) work around coming to an idea is the part that sometimes takes the longest. Sometimes my day looks like: going for a walk, being in my studio for a few hours, going for another walk, going back, coming home, writing for a bit. I’m not sure how you feel about your studio time too, being someone who is engaged materially with things, just from the writing you sent me about your interests…. I feel like studio time can be a lot of contemplation and less making, depending on what the task ahead is.

RS: I really agree with that, I feel sometimes I have to spend almost equal time very deliberately not making anything, just either being surrounded by it, or being completely removed and just thinking about it. I met with Kelly Mark for a brief studio visit earlier in the year, and she said something along the lines of her headspace or mind, being her studio, and that how she thinks about things is way more important than the time she spends making them. I thought that was super interesting.

LK: The making time does not just mean the time that you’re tangibly physically making something; it really is the time around the literal studio… it’s just as, if not more important, for me at least. I think that’s the case for many artists, and then there’s other artists who feel they might have to be at their studio from 9 am and leave at 6 pm, and they just go all day. I do have days where I don’t feel like I need to be making work, (on those days) it’s almost like my body needs to get some sort of action out of me, and I’ll need to experiment with things, put things together in different ways, or just try a bunch of things without the goal of resolving it. You know, sometimes you just get that urge: I just need to do this, this needs to get out of me. Art making is such a nonlinear activity. The more I’m learning (that) whatever I can do to make my studio space very respected, and a space that’s full of care and love, the better the making can be. And to do that requires so much nurturing from the outside.

RS: I think that’s a great way to think of it, as a space to put care into.
LK: It’s like a baby, you have to read its needs, and your own needs.

RS: And sort out the balancing of the two.

LK: Yeah.

RS: You work with a wide variety of materials, and they all seem carefully considered. What is involved in your decision-making process regarding your material choices?

LK: People always ask that, and I’m always at first like “I don’t know”… but I do know: it’s intuition, and what some people might call a series of mistakes. I’ve stopped seeing it as ‘mistakes.’ For example, I did a show at TPW Gallery a few years ago, when I first started using these spherical magnets to hang these large skins of photo paper and film, and that magnet being the material that held the work was something that was so important to me. Because I’m always thinking about the structural conditions of something as being embedded into the work itself, so it couldn't just be a flat rare earth magnet that looks pretty typical and almost overtly functional, it had to (have the) feel of the work itself. But even finding that material was a month-long process of weeding out all the other possibilities and, sometimes I have a tendency to be really hard on myself. Like, “I'm getting it wrong. It's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong” …but, no, it's just not the right one and this is just part of the process. I just have to see this thing through and realize it’s not right. I guess I see it as gleaning or weeding through possibilities until the right one comes along, and the only way I can describe the right one is that it’s a feeling inside, where I can say, “this is the one.” I try to trust that. And then it often makes sense later and I can say, “oh this is why, it was reminding me of a body in this way, or because it wasn't overly fabricated in this way”. A lot of these materials are found on my daily errands and encounters. With some of the bowls I started working with, I would go to this shop in Chinatown quite a lot for my own domestic needs, so it’s really enfolded within my own personal life and day-to-day activity. It’s pretty intuitive, and driven by desire and attraction, but I think attraction also inherently entails a certain amount of repulsion. That’s something I always try to be conscious of in my making. Especially with my bowl works, they really teeter on those edges of both being beautiful and repulsive at the same time.
For the wall material, when I first started making these flexible wall installations, it came out of this desire to be like, “I made these photographic works, these photograms.” It was in this show Line Litter at Franz Kaka, that was the first time I used this flexible wall material, with these snake-like walls. It started with these photograms, and I didn’t want to just frame these photograms in a neutral frame, that didn’t feel like the right thing to do; if I’m thinking about the image as a body, then what’s the casing of the body? Because that is just as much the body as the image, so I went and reversed the frames and filled the frames with silicone, so it felt like bone and marrow. But going a step beyond that, there is also the structure that holds these images, which is also not neutral, and I wasn’t interested in hanging something on a straight white wall. In hindsight I felt like I wanted it to be more immersive, I wanted more transparency. Because of that, it becomes almost more disorienting at the same time. So, I was thinking about designing a wall that emulated a body, by maybe adding curves etc., and that was a long process of thinking that it might not feel right, and then I came to the realization that fabricating to that degree for me at least, isn’t the way that I like to work. I like working with available materials in ways that feel less familiar, and in ways that always point back to what they're used for. So, these building materials are used for building spaces or worlds… I'm interested in repurposing them to build these alternative models of provisional spaces that resemble bodies. So, with that material, I had to axe the idea of fabricating a wall – which, number one: seemed super expensive; and two: I'm not a designer. I'm not a technically oriented person, I don’t do well with precision and that’s something I embrace about myself and that's not my inclination. It wasn’t the right move for me, but it was (through) a series of google image searches and I found a little clipart piece of the track, and I was immediately like, “what is that?”, because it looked like vertebrae, or teeth, or a spine. It was through there that I found that material. So, it’s often this long arduous journey that is both intentional and totally accidental and through a series of mistakes, but less mistakes and more a process of gleaning.

RS: I find when I work, I have something in mind and then it ends up being almost reverse engineered that, and then I try to find what will make it happen. And it’s almost never what I originally think is going to work.
Where did your interest in working conceptually with the body come from? Was this another intuitive decision?

LK: I think it was both intuitive and it’s always been the way I’ve worked. I would go as far as to say that (because) I’m an identical twin, I grew up with a sense of a double-ness, always. A literal doubleness of my body. My sister and I were extremely close growing up and we really shared everything, we had an extremely close relationship, and I always felt like more than one being. I know some siblings are close, but with being an identical twin, you were literally formed in a womb together, you came out together and you just understand. I always understood my being in relation to another. I always had a different sense of my body in that way, and I think that that inherently informed my inclination towards these things. But then of course with being a female-identifying racialized body, as I started critically looking at my social position, my own identity more, and doing a lot more reading of things like feminist theory, (and) I realized that there’s also a social importance to why I was thinking about the body. But it does feel like a natural exploration, and it feels like one that is endless. I don’t think the limits of the body can be defined or determined, especially with art making which is such a bodily process. There's this incredible opportunity to translate or transmute one's own literal body into these other materials that can produce feeling. I also have ASMR\textsuperscript{23}, and have had it intensely since I was a little kid; me and my sister both had it. Before it was even termed, I remember being in my mid or early twenties and seeing that there was a term for this, me and my sister used to just always call it ‘that feeling’. But it’s also a tactile thing; it’s Internal and external at the same time, because this

\footnotetext[23]{“What is ASMR? It is an acronym for "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response" (which is not officially classified as a condition by the sciences) that is first bandied about on the internet around the close of the first decade of the 2000s. For the most part, the words making up the name are self-explanatory, but you might be wondering about meridian. Meridian generally refers to a high point in excitement, but technically it refers to any of the pathways along which the body's vital energy flows according to the theory behind acupuncture. Autonomous also has specialized meaning: it can refer to involuntary physiological responses or to the autonomic nervous system, which autonomously regulates bodily functions, including sexual arousal. ASMR, however, is a nonsexual response. According to the modest ones who answered questionnaires on the topic, it is simply a tingling feeling that starts at the top of the head and trickles downward—and is characteristically triggered by a person softly whispering into a camera and making random hand movements along objects.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary “What Does ASMR Mean?” (Merriam-Webster), https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/asmr-abbreviation-meaning.}
external thing is happening, but you feel all these things internally. So, I just have a very internal feeling-oriented kind of existence. I think with art, I really appreciated that it could provoke an internal feeling- not that artwork triggers my ASMR, but there's something similar *(there)* for me.

**RS:** Like a tactile or physical, internal response in regard to it?

**LK:** Yeah, whether that's felt in your gut, as a guttural sensation or some kind of other bodily sensation. I like that art has that ability to in some ways reflect on the body through an internal response.

**RS:** For the show *If I Have a Body*, you had mentioned you were interested in the contrasting relationship of speed between your work and the work of Veronika Pasova, who you shared a space with, talking about how yours is quicker in creation and then slower to metabolize in comparison; could you speak more to that?

**LK:** I feel like it’s a little related to what we were just speaking about, so it’s a nice segue: Veronika’s is also framed, and I love her work, and it wasn’t to say hers doesn’t metabolize in the body, but more there is a difference in speeds, than how I understand the speed of my work to go in the body.

I feel as though – going back to the studio day conversation– her work, she’s a painter, *(is such that)* she spends maybe 40 plus hours on one painting, and it's extremely laborious where she has to put on many podcasts and go paint. And my work is more like going crazy and not having any clarity for three months until this, “Ah!” happens, and sometimes it happens in an hour span or less. But it’s through the accumulation of many materials I’ve gathered or things that I’ve tried. So, there’s a difference of speeds in when it’s made, and mine is more driven gutturally, whereas hers has to be pre-mapped. Even though she could change things along the way, there's a different sense of commitment in terms of… you're not as reactive, and I think my work is more reacting to the material as *(it)* is there right then. Which can take a long time to even get *(to)* a place where you can create an interaction. But then, what I do think, or hope at least, is that the
work does trigger a bodily sensation and that sensation is something that lingers beyond. I think about the concepts of the after image, or eidetic imagery, which is a concept that I was introduced to by Kristy Trinier who is a curator at the SAAG …. I did a show there that she titled *Eidetic Tides*. Eidetic memory is different from photographic memory... I don’t want to get it wrong, but I believe it’s more like memories that are held in the body, in a way. So, when I think about that, *(I think of)* the speed of a sensation and how that lingers in the body. Obviously, you can’t fully trace that, but the fact is that we are formed by our memories of things, by stories that we’ve been told, things we’ve internalized visually or all these things and the potential that they stay in our body’s kind of indefinitely. I think especially with the *If I Have a Body* show, I was trying to make the wall full of holes, tears and scars to feel like it was both in form and in ruin at the same time. I wanted that sense of both destruction and beauty to linger in the body. I think that’s what I meant.

**RS:** I found it interesting when you said that, because I have a painting background and now have been making sculptural works that can sometimes take form very fast in the actual physical creation process. And that was always something I felt… weird about, coming from this laborious oil painting background to working with plaster that cures so quickly, trying to get it to take form before it becomes unworkable. It was nice to hear it put into words.

**LK:** I think it has to do a lot with materiality also, is what you’re speaking to. Materials speak in their own ways, and sometimes that creation or interaction with materials *(is)* more like collaborations with materials. What they produce can speak or inhabit the body in a more lengthened duration of time. Or are more like sensations or feelings, but feelings are more real than anything else.

**RS:** For the works where you include photographic elements that are continually sensitive; how did you come to start working that way/start including things like that in your work?

**LK:** Good question; I guess when I was doing photography in my undergrad, I was still taking photographs, but I was using film, so I was interested in that kind of tactile engagement; the
work in the darkroom. And then I was always constructing photos, I wasn’t interested in
documentary, more the constructed photograph. I was thinking about (the) natural and unnatural,
and I think constructing a photograph is forcibly showing the unnaturalness of things. I wasn’t
trying to manipulate a viewer into thinking I was presenting anything as it was, because I didn’t
believe in anything being ‘as it is’, it’s all subjective and embodied. And then as I started doing
more photography, I was making scenes and maquettes with photographs and found objects, and
it was becoming more sculptural. I was creating these provisional sculptural spaces and then
photographing them. And then pushed beyond that, to using some old photo paper and just
looking at the colour, and it started becoming more abstract. This is another one of those
accidental material finds that took years to finally happen, to be like, “Right, this is the thing I’ve
been thinking about” or “feeling about”, because I think feelings come before thought, and I
certainly couldn’t make sense of a lot of the material choices I was making at the time. So I was
printing photos at Toronto Image Works, and they at the time were still using a lot of analog
materials, so I was getting these photos printed through an analog process and I think one day I
asked them, “Hey, do you guys have any expired materials that you could give me?” because
maybe I wanted to work bigger or something, and they just gave me some big rolls of photo
paper that had been exposed and so we’re unusable to them. I was thinking of using these
materials to take more photos, not necessarily to use them sculpturally. But when I opened them,
I went, “Oh wow, these are really flesh coloured, and really strange, and they’re sensitive” and
that felt like the right thing for me. As I continued to work with those materials, it makes more
sense to me now than it did then, but it’s like “oh I have always been interested in thinking about
the body as an ongoing construction rather than a fixed entity.”
I was also attracted to the industrial scale of it, but the inherent... fragility is the wrong word, I
guess with some of these walls, what I think about is this idea of a soft monument; what does it
mean for something to feel so monumental and in some ways aggressive, but also to
simultaneously feel flexible; because it literally is flexible material, and sensitive. And how those
two things can coexist, so that's what I was thinking a lot about. The photo stuff was a long, long
accident/not accident. But a long process of getting there, and then doing something with that.
The film entered in an accidental way as well. Toronto Image Works was like, “We have a whole
box that we haven’t even opened but it’s expired and it’s photo paper, come get it,” and my
studio was quite close at the time, but still about six blocks, so I would always carry these big
rolls of paper. And this box itself was so heavy, I was like, “What is this? This is not a normal roll of photo paper.” And I got to my studio and it was this film, and I was like, “What is this?” It’s more that glossy, translucent material. So that's how I discovered that. Since then, with If I Have a Body, I started sourcing other films from other companies and I found (things like) “this company is more green and purple, reptilian colours,” or, “this one is more fleshy and human colours.” And with, If I Have a Body, I definitely wanted to incorporate the “more than human”

RS: I found when I was looking through your website, and it says “continually sensitive paper” for materials, just the use of the word “sensitive” in regard to something that is a material is such a personified thing: to be sensitive to something. I mean, in relation to working with themes of the body, and then having it index itself and its space is fascinating

I started using that term in grad school…. After a series of studio visits, I was really trying to understand my use of that material and my attraction to it, and sensitivity came up as this ‘word’ …I was always calling them a ‘skin’. Language becomes a way to imply so much about material. I was interested in this industrial wording for it, like, ‘photographic paper, darkroom chemicals, unprocessed and unfixed,’ and then continually sensitive brings a body into it or personifies it in a way that felt like the right move to me, because I wasn't just trying to impose my will over these materials. I was really interested, and still am, in minimalism, but my work is never going to be minimalism; but I’m more interested in where minimalism collides with the body, and how that wasn’t fully explored. I think realizing that was this huge moment for me like, “Oh right, this can be its own body and I’m not exerting my own will on this thing.”

RS: For more of a technical question, because I have a very limited knowledge of photography, does it eventually develop so far that it’s essentially a blank image? Or because of the age of the paper, does it develop so far and then eventually stop?

LK: It depends. It depends what kind of light it's exposed to, natural light will definitely shift the material the most over time. What I found with a lot of the paper I work with, it gets deeper brown, or ‘tans’ more, I call it tanning; and if there's chemicals, sometimes it depends on the humidity. My studio at Bard was in upstate New York in a barn, and it was really, really hot and
humid, and I’m not precious about how I keep the materials a lot of the time, I want the environment to infect the material, because it is so much a part of it. The works that I would bring back from those summers, they would be really changed. Especially with darkroom chemicals, sometimes to the point of getting metallic looking, almost like if you cut a stone open and there's a bunch of metallic minerals in there. *(With)* some of the materials, I figure out more along the way. If you looked at the show *Eidetic Tides*, there was a wall installation where I used only film, and all those films were tanned on my studio window, they were different films that I used but they were all tanned on my studio window for periods of a week to a few months at a time. I didn’t know how they would change until after I took them down. So, there's some knowability and then there’s a lot of unknowability. Another recent one was at Oakville gallery, where I filled the *(whole)* room with just rolls of photo paper, film, and let that sit in the sunroom. There’s only a screen so rain could get in, there’s no protection really. It’s not a gallery space, artists aren’t supposed to use that space technically, but I really wanted to use it, because it’s both inside and outside at the same time, and that's so conceptually interesting to me. That lived there for almost four months, and I definitely salvaged all the material and even seeing that after was like, “Whoa.” It did the craziest stuff I had ever seen, psychedelic colours and all this.

**RS:** So, they start getting exposed a little bit in the studio before they go to the gallery. Do you feel like you make a distinction between the work as it exists in the studio in an “unfinished state”, as opposed to in the gallery, where it might be in a more traditionally “finished state”?

**LK:** It’s tricky because in some ways some of my pieces are very distinct, but I always find they operate most truly, and most authentically to me when they are positioned in installation in a non-singular format. So even if there's a bowl that’s in and of itself a sculpture, and it’s done, it can be a singular object, with cast objects in it or whatever. Ideally for me, it’s placed in relation to something else. I always want works to be in relation to each other. So, I guess the parts are in some way finished, or they have latent possibilities. Where I think of the work in the studio as being in their larval state, and then the gallery being their manifestation in that temporal amount of time. And then of course it can be subject to change again, a lot of these films and photo papers I’ve reused over and over. With my more recent show at Oakville Galleries, it was an
entirely floor-based show where I was really trying to push this notion of the provisional, or the pre-built. I was building these walls… when you entered the space, it was just a stack of the plexi track, instead of a built wall. So, I was really thinking for the build, and the latency in the materials at that point.

RS: It’s almost as though they seem – I don’t think life cycle is the right word – but there's something very lively about it. Existing and doing something on its own in the studio, and then continuing to do that in the gallery, as opposed to a painting where you typically paint it and it sits in the gallery in a fixed state.

Is there anyone you’re reading or looking at right now?

LK: People that I’ve read a lot… Trinh T. Minh-ha, who is a Vietnamese filmmaker, artist, philosopher. She writes in this incredible way about ‘inside and outside’, and bodies, and who gets to decide what ‘other-ness’ is. And that’s really been formative in how I build these walls, there’s all these formal things that they do, but I’m also really interested in how the walls distinguish spaces that are neither and both inside and outside, within a space. So, it really complicates what we think of as binary of inside and outside. And also, I don’t think our bodies end at the skin, I think our bodies extend beyond that and we’re continually infecting the environment and vice versa. The environment – including other bodies as well. She writes about it from a much more social position, but I find that really personally inspiring.

Sylvia Wynter is someone else who I read, she also writes about the human, being human as a praxis.

For a while, Karen Barad was someone who was really influential to me. They’re a quantum physics feminist theorist, who writes about queerness and quantum physics in this extremely radical way. I actually think, from what you were writing about in your (text about your) interests, they might be someone of interest to you. You could look up a text called On Touching- The Inhuman That Therefore I am.
There’s them, and then for artists I continually think about... Do you know the artist Julia Phillips? She’s American, I think she’s about my age. She makes sculptures that are really strange and bodily. Less materially loose, much more controlled with the materials. She really explores the body, trauma and violence, but there's such an elegance to the way she uses her materials, but also there's a sensitivity to how she’s using the materials that I’ve always been drawn to, and I think the work is just so strong. And she works really well in installation, as well.

Jutta Koether, she’s an incredible painter and has been painting for decades. Explores punk, feminism, she does a lot of musical collaborations, but her installations are always really, really provocative, and so bodily. Her work, even though she’s a painter, it’s so based in installation- at least the shows of hers that I have seen online that I really love.

Those are the two that I can really think of: I’ve always really loved Rosemarie Trockel’s work, and Iza Genzken, these are those big name ones. Just their unabashed use of materials and doing whatever they want; not being bound to one medium, and that their work can be confounding. The work that I’m always drawn back to is often work that I understand the least, but you feel towards.

**RS: It gives you something to work through, trying to make sense of something.**

After thanking Kang for her time and conversation, we ended our discussion here after approximately an hour and a half.
Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

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Educational Background
2021 MFA Candidate, University of Western Ontario. London, ON.
2019 BFA (Honours), University of Manitoba - School of Fine Art. Winnipeg, MB.

Solo Exhibitions

Exhibitions
2021 Cajal Creative Art Exhibit. Western University, London, Ontario.
2019 Fresh Paint/New Construction. Artmûr, Montreal, Québec.
2019 FEAST. Gallery of Student Art, Curated by Genevieve Farrell. Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Publications

Related Work Experience
2021 [Winter] Teaching Assistant, “Introduction to Sculpture and Installation” for Professor Soheila Esfahani, Department of Visual Arts, Western University.
2020 Workshop Facilitation, “Art After Dark”, Western University.
2020 [Fall] Teaching Assistant, “Introduction to Sculpture and Installation”
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2020 Workshop Facilitation, Elgin County Railway Museum.
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2018 Drawing and Mixed Media Instructor, Inspire Community Outreach Inc.
2017 Basic Painting Instructor, James Valley Colony School.

Scholarly Awards, Grants, and Distinctions
2021 [Winter] Western Graduate Research Scholarship (WGRS), School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, Western University.
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