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From Dust to Dust

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Fine Arts

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FROM DUST TO DUST
(Thesis format: Integrated Article)

by

Lynette de Montreuil

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts

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Abstract

This integrated article thesis includes three components: an extended artist’s statement, documentation of my artwork, and an interview with artist Aganetha Dyck. Through these three formats, this document explores the ways in which art can break down human vs. nonhuman binaries, thereby highlighting the agency of nonhuman materials. Theorist Jane Bennett proposes that seeing all matter as being ‘vibrant’ would shift our relationship with non-human materials whereby creating more sustainable practices. Vibrant matter would ask us to consider more deeply the origins, propensities and disposability of all material bodies. I seek to have a sustainable practice and work collaboratively with the tendencies and capacities of these materials. This practice involves an investigation of materials from seed to product, using my own body as a means of production. I seek to highlight the continuous state of change in materials and the permeable border between human and nonhuman matter which helps break the anthropocentric view.

Keywords

actant, Aganetha Dyck, agency, Ann Hamilton, cradle to cradle, ecology, human vs. nonhuman, Jane Bennett, Mark Dion, Rebecca Solnit, sustainable art practices, vibrant matter
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Introduction

This Masters of Fine Arts thesis dossier contains three chapters that accompany my thesis exhibition, which will take place at the Artlab Gallery at Western University, from April 16th to the 23rd, 2015. The three chapters of this thesis are: a Comprehensive Artist Statement; Practice Documentation; and an Interview with Aganetha Dyck. This dossier, in conjunction with the artwork I have presented in my thesis exhibition, represents the research I conducted during my MFA.

My Comprehensive Artist Statement makes up the first chapter of my thesis. I draw upon artists and theorists who inform my interest in nonhuman material agency and sustainable art practices. This chapter draws upon the work of political theorist Jane Bennett to question how viewing all matter as being vibrant can shift our anthropocentric view to a more inclusive way of knowing, as well as change the way we engage with these materials. In my own work, I aim for a sustainable practice and work with organic material that I grow or gather from green spaces. In pursuing this goal I grew a field of flax in the summer of 2014 at the Western Field Station, which is a multidisciplinary research site located approximately 14 km north of the main Western campus. A number of different crops are grown there for a range of research projects. My project seeks to highlight material agency, tendencies and origins. The goal of this research is to use art to raise ecological concerns and highlight the vibrancy of materials that otherwise appear inert.

The second chapter is made up of my Practice Documentation, where each image of my studio-based research is accompanied by a title, material description, and brief text elaborating on the context. This research reflects the issues at the heart of my artist statement, which examines many of these works in detail. These images are organized based on the chronological order in which they are introduced in the above Artist Statement. The works
presented reflect issues of origins, non-human agency, means of production, questions of technological progress and bodily knowledge through direct skin contact.

Chapter Three is an interview with Aganetha Dyck, a Canadian artist who has been working with honeybees for more than 20 years. I focus on her collaboration with these insects, where she gives them equal credit within the project. Her work raises ecological questions and breaks the human vs nonhuman binary. Dyck attempts to communicate with the honeybees and has accessed researchers in adjoining fields to further her understanding and the scope of her project. I also seek to intimately understand the materials I work with and have sought out researchers who can provide further knowledge.

Both my Artist Statement and this Interview seek to acknowledge the agency of nonhuman matter and how breaking from our anthropocentric view of the world could create more sustainable actions. Central questions to my art practice include: How can my art practice further break down the human vs. nonhuman binary? How can attempting to listen deeply to nonhuman matter create a more sustainable world? How could understanding all material as being vibrant change our perspective? How might seeing ourselves (humans) in nonhuman material affect our actions? How are we changed by the materials we interact with and where is this permeable border, where “I” versus “it” becomes ambiguous? How could this permeable border then be utilized as an effective site for creating change?
Comprehensive Artist Statement

My artwork investigates human engagement with nonhuman material, drawing attention to this material’s agency, tendencies and origins. I am interested in considering the material’s life span from cradle to cradle¹ with the artwork being in a continuous state of change. This variable state reflects life cycles in nature and reveals how seemingly inert materials transform over time. I use locally sourced organic material, either foraging it directly from green spaces, or growing it myself. By working with materials from seed, I am intimately aware of all the steps in the production of goods. I work with this material as a way to circumvent consumer culture and gain a deeper understanding of the material’s innate tendencies. I aim for a sustainable practice, and I process these materials by hand as opposed to motorized methods. This direct skin-to-skin contact with the material is key to understanding “how the body through physical labour leaves a transparent presence in material and how labour is a way of knowing.”² By having the materials exert their own agency, the binary of human versus nonhuman is challenged, and the division between where one ends and the other begins is ambiguous. This in-depth knowledge then opens up questions regarding technological progress and the means of production. I will draw on artists, writers and theorists whose work raises ecological concerns and seeks to make the nonhuman’s will more conspicuous.

Aganetha Dyck is one of these artists: she collaborates with honeybees as a means to break down the human versus nonhuman binary. Dyck attempts to communicate with honeybees by using non-verbal means, including the human-made system of braille, but also bee pheromones. In doing so, she approaches the project from both camps, not just

¹ The phrase ‘cradle to cradle’ was coined by Walter R. Stahel in the 1970’s and it models human industry on natural systems with all nutrients being reused, recycled, composted or consumed.

attempting to communicate from her own position, but also through the position of the bees as well. Her deep desire to communicate with these insects is rooted in seeing the honeybees “as ‘canaries of the earth,’ indicators of planetary illness.” Widely publicized in recent years, the honeybee colony collapse is thought to be a result of genetically modified crops, neonicotinoids (a class of lethal pesticides), and the decline of diversified farming. These insects may have the knowledge to help us save the planet if only we could find a way to listen. This deep listening is key to further understanding and locating a middle space of equality, as opposed to human dominated agency. I am inspired by Dyck’s artwork and her attitude towards all living creatures; in turn I work with organic material towards a similar goal.

Jane Bennett is a political theorist who talks about nonhuman materials as being actants:

“an entity or a process that makes a difference to the direction of a larger assemblage without that difference being reducible to an efficient cause...We tend to default to the assumption that the most potent actant in a group is a human being. In some assemblages, that’s the case, but in other productions of powerful effects, human strivings are not the key operators.”

This view is generally a Western European or colonial attitude, as indigenous people have traditionally had a more symbiotic relationship with the natural world. In Vibrant Matter, Bennett questions how seeing nonhuman materials as being active participants, instead of dull matter, changes how we engage with our surroundings and the production of goods. In my own work, I seek to illuminate the agency of nonhuman matter.

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3 Verna Reid, Women Between: Construction of self in the work of Sharon Butala, Aganetha Dyck, Mary Meigs and Mary Pratt (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2008), 162.


Throughout my practice I investigate the characteristics and tendencies of material in the spirit of collaboration, whereby the materials have agency within the project. Jane Bennett examines how matter is seen as passive, brute stuff; this dull matter is seen as the opposite of vibrant life (us). In order to challenge anthropocentrism, Bennett examines “the capacity of edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” By collaborating with material tendencies instead of forcing them to act under my will, I mean to suggest a break in human dominated agency.

My project *Onionskins* is an example of this collaboration, as it allowed for a dialogue between the material and myself. I made paper solely out of onionskins; while still wet, I laid it on a form to air-dry. Onionskins have a high shrinkage rate, so the paper rippled and was torn as it dried. Traditionally the paper would have been treated and dried under pressure, whereby forcing the material to be flat through mechanical means. By being open to the tendencies of the onionskins, the material had authorship in its final form. This piece also had a skin-like quality and sense of fragility. The work will break down and continue to crumble under its own weight with the passage of time. The turbulence caused by the movement of bodies within the gallery space accelerates this dissolution. The artwork isn’t meant to be archival, and here change is evident through its deconstruction. The piece will continuously transform until it is only small fragments and can then be directly reabsorbed into the earth, returning to where it came from. This transformation over time is an inherent property of the material itself, as opposed to being the force of extraneous elements.

Another project that incorporates ecology and the origin of materials is *Flax Field*. This piece is an installation of flax lying directly on the gallery floor. The flax is laid in rows, which both reproduce the dimensions of the field it was grown in and the process of

6 Bennett, vii
7 Bennett, viii
retting\textsuperscript{8} it underwent there. Through representing the scale and the process that the flax underwent, the piece becomes an analysis of where materials come from and our engagement with them on a raw level. The flax fills the space, making contact with all four walls: the viewer enters the space by directly engaging with the material and walking across it. Sarah Ahmed states that “[when] objects come to life, they leave their impressions—objects come alive through bodily contact, ‘as the skin of the object ‘impresses’ the skin of the body.’”\textsuperscript{9} Although there isn’t direct skin-to-skin contact, walking across the surface invites the viewer to touch the material both here and throughout the exhibition, as this action removes the preciousness inherent to artwork.

When walking across \textit{Flax Field} the viewer’s body is implicated in the work as the flax crunches and cracks under foot. “Sound can be uncanny, moving the listener in ways that cannot be easily described or contained.”\textsuperscript{10} The ground acts as a sound stage and the work engages more than just one’s sense of vision; it’s a tactile experience where sound, touch, smell, and taste act in unison. Bennett proposes that these five senses can counter the image of inert matter by highlighting the “fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.”\textsuperscript{11} The viewer, through this sensory experience, is actively present within the installation. This is reminiscent of Ann Hamilton’s artwork in which, “[performance becomes] a rite of inquiry into the ways in which audacious interrogations into movement, light, and sound can slow the pulse of contemporary time so that audiences more fully experience the present tense.”\textsuperscript{12} The participant’s deep listening and bodily awareness bring the focus not just to the material underfoot, but also the body in relation to it.

\textsuperscript{8} Retting literally means rotting. Through prolonged exposure of the stalk to moisture, the flax’s woody core breaks down, allowing for easier separation and further processing of the hair like bast fibers.


\textsuperscript{10} Marks, xv-xvi.

\textsuperscript{11} Bennett, ix.

\textsuperscript{12} Wallach, 53.
*Flax Field* also questions the origin of materials through its contrast to the gallery space, which has white walls, controlled temperature and specialized lighting. The gallery is a highly processed and synthetic environment that is far removed from the sources of its materials; while the flax is more readily connected to its origins by the reproduction of the ‘site’ of its inception. The flax is defiant of the gallery’s boundaries and infiltrates the space as it continues to spread by means of smell, sound and people physically tracking it around. Smell is a unique sense in that it can’t be turned off or blocked out; even if one were to plug their nose, they would still taste the scent on their tongue. As Laura Marks states, “Smells do not respect walls or national borders: they drift and infuse and inhabit.”\(^{13}\) The piece works on all of the senses, creating an evocatively layered immersive environment.

In my practice I seek to exclusively use my body and hands for processing the materials, as opposed to using motorized means. This bodily experience is key to intimately understanding the materials I work with. Rebecca Solnit notes that Ann Hamilton’s artwork:

> “is a labor of tending, caring for, an attending, a labor which asks us to remember origins, to read the world, its objects, its inhabitants, our interactions, our customs, our habits, our blind spots against our platitudes of progress, abundance, plenitude.”\(^{14}\)

In contemporary society we are so far removed from the raw materials of the products we buy, we cease to understand and fully consider the means of production. For example, typically the protein sold in the grocery store is hermetically sealed and the animal’s death is almost absent. If its death is concealed from the consumer, how can we fully appreciate its life? By contrast, I use my hands to intimately connect to the materials and


fully understand the means of their production, as opposed to using prefabricated materials where their origin isn’t readily known.

My flax process is made evident, step-by-step, so that the audience can appreciate the time involved in making a piece of linen. With greater appreciation, we place a higher value on materials, making them less easily tossed aside. The viewer participates in this bodily labour when they walk over Flax Field, as their weight and strides help break down the material. Richard Sennett, in discussing tactile knowledge, says the craftsman “enlightens by showing rather than telling.”¹⁵ Here, walking is a productive labour that aids in the next step of processing in which the inner woody stalk is separated from the flax by means of a flax break. In line with Sennett, this work shows the viewer how to physically participate in the actual process. Rebecca Solnit, when discussing the work of Ann Hamilton says:

“The body is no longer experienced as a natural system integrated with other natural systems. Work, as Karl Marx was the first to mourn, has developed into so many fragmented acts that we live in a largely constructed world whose processes of construction are obscured and disconnected from the toil of the body and the imagination. This over constructed world, then, contains no stories of outside, unless we remember what we made it out of.”¹⁶

I share these concerns; by implicating the viewer’s body in the process, I seek to induce a closer inspection of these materials. I ask the viewer to remember our collective past, a time when toil, care, and hard work were essential to producing the things we now take for granted.

¹⁶ Rebecca Solnit, As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art, 161.
Dirt Field is another artwork that taps into the origins of materials and demonstrates how individually we are capable of meaningful action. Here the dirt in which the flax was grown is painted onto a wall representing the field itself. The surface is velvety and the material, which is not quite identifiable, calls for a closer inspection. The work brings about a deeper consideration of the landscape; in line with Solnitt’s observations of Ann Hamilton’s work, what is “created [is] not a representation of a place out there but a sample of it, a piece of out there that [suggests] we pay attention to all the other things that [connect] here to here, from our garbage to our food.”¹⁷ This dirt is the very nourishment and source matter in which the flax seeds take root. Here dirt is considered as both a place of birth and site of decay, as matter continuously blossoms out and decomposes back into it. This dirt wall draws upon the history of earth art and pays homage to Richard Long’s dirt walls of the 1980’s. Dirt Field reproduces the flax field I grew at the Western Field Station. At a size of 6 meters by 4 ½ meters, it is a very manageable area for one person to farm. This size could easily reflect a yard where an individual could grow goods for personal consumption. Dirt Field asks us to more deeply consider our landscape, origins of materials, and obtainable steps of action. Another artist who is interested in ecology and reinstituting small public vegetable gardens is Amy Francheschini. Based in San Francisco, she is working to re-establish victory gardens. These gardens were maintained during World War II as a means for providing produce during wartime food rationing. Franceschini brings back this tradition as a way for people to have a closer connection to their food. Research has shown that smaller agricultural operations use every square foot more efficiently than factory farms, producing a greater yield, as well as being more diversified and profitable. “According to USDA records from the 1990’s, farms with less than four acres in size average $1,400 per acre. Per acre profit steadily declines to less than $40 an acre for farms over 1,000

acres.”¹⁸ *Dirt Field* investigates land use and the ability of the individual to take action in a meaningful way. Projects, like the work of Francheschini, demonstrate the potential to reinvigorate otherwise unused land for more productive and purposeful means.

My thesis project considers technology and the theme of convenience versus progress. Hand processed flax delivers the highest quality material producing finer, longer and more supple fibers, as the shaft is removed with its roots intact as opposed to mechanical means, which cut the stalks where they meet the ground. The plant roots are important as the valuable flax fibers run from the top of the stalks to the tips of the roots and cutting the plant not only shortens fiber length, it also dries them out resulting in poorer quality. Mechanized means have yet to replicate the high quality of hand pulled flax, suggesting that instead of looking to technology for an answer to ecological issues, the solution can be found by looking back at ways we’ve done things, and reconsidering more harmonious ways of living with the earth. Contemporary precedents for this mode of inquiry can be found in the American artist Mark Dion’s work. In *Neukom Vivarium*, he removed a tree from a protected watershed, placing it into a specially made building that was meant to replicate the conditions of an old growth forest. He explained:

“[we’re] putting it in a sort of Sleeping Beauty coffin, a greenhouse we’re building around it. And we’re pumping it up with a life support system... All those things are substituting what nature does, emphasizing how, once that’s gone, it’s incredibly difficult, expensive, and technological to approximate that system...It shows that, despite all of our technology and money, when we destroy a natural system, it’s virtually impossible to get it back.”¹⁹


Here Dion shows the fallacy of our technology to replace natural systems, as an old
growth forest is made up of so many different material bodies working in tandem. He
questions how we can continue to destroy ecosystems in the name of progress, when our
technology has yet to replicate the very sites that are eradicated. In my sustainable
practice I respect and collaborate with materials as opposed to participating in the endless
consumption of overly processed goods that add to the destruction of ecosystems.

Seeing ourselves (humans) in nonhuman materials is another strategy I employ to break
down binaries. Whereas Aganetha Dyck’s work with honeybees involves using bee’s
wax, which evokes the texture of human skin, I work with flax. When flax is processed it
is remarkably similar to blonde hair, as the saying flaxen hair implies. Flaxen Hair is one
of the first pieces the viewer encounters upon entering the gallery and without the
complete context of the show the viewer is confronted by this human-like material. This
experience can be disorientating, with the distinction between human and nonhuman
becoming permeable and porous. This disorientation opens up new possibilities of seeing
and engaging with these materials.20

Heritage plays a role in my art practice, as my ancestors were farmers who came from
Europe and settled in the Canadian prairies. There are strong homesteader values instilled
in me through my grandparents, in that every part of a material is used. One example of
this is the patterned fabric sacks that dry goods used to come in. Here the packaging of
raw goods in and of itself was valuable, with this fabric being made into clothing. When
this clothing started to wear out it would be cut it up for making quilts. When the quilts
were worn down they would be turned into rags. Later these scrap rags would be used in
other ways such as tying plants to stakes. This process continued with the reusing and
reduction of materials until they dissolved. In this practice all goods are reused, recycled,
consumed or composted. I agree with Bennett’s sentiment when she says:

“I should try to minimize the impact of my actions so as to minimize the
damage or destruction of other things with which I share existence. The

20 Ahmed, 158.
ecologist James Nash describes this as the ‘earth-affirming norm’ of frugality, a sparing ‘of the resources necessary for human communities and sparing of the other species that are both values in themselves and instrumental values for human needs.’”

This project could be read as nostalgic, but I would argue that it is necessary going forward to look back at methods we’ve used in the past and once again institute them in our lives, as opposed to looking to technology for answers and continually making more disposable ‘stuff’.

Currently, there are numerous movements that embrace this call to action such as upcycling, locally made, farm to fork restaurants, seed libraries and tiny home living. These movements all seek to minimize our carbon footprint by using all parts of a resource, minimizing the distance products travel, and conserving as well as consuming less. We need to see beyond ourselves as everything mutually shares the water and air. Water is literally taken up into the air and rains down across the planet; nothing is left untouched.

“Think about the possibility of the work of art shifting allegiance—embodying rather that representing the cyclical, embracing labour, biology, mortality, change, process; becoming more deeply part of the mutable world rather than a monument on its banks. Reconnect the act of making to its sister acts of labouring, consuming, attending, the acts that make the world, over and over again.”

This is the core of my art practice; an investigation of materials on an equal plain that is open to unexpected outcomes and seeks to deeply listen to what we could learn if all

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21 Bennett, 121-122.

22 Rebecca Solnit, As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art, 174.
matter was realized as being vibrant.\textsuperscript{23} This opens up avenues of rethinking how our actions affect other matter and how other matter in turn affects us.

\textsuperscript{23} Bennett, 111.
Practice Documentation

Onionskins, 2014, onionskin paper, 48” x 18” x 16”

Here, onionskins are cooked in order to break them down for paper pulp. The pulled paper sheets, which are wet, are then laid on a form to air-dry. Onionskin paper has a high shrinkage rate so the paper ripples and is torn during this process. Traditionally, the paper would have been dried under pressure. Although in this case, control is relinquished and the paper’s characteristics allow for authorship in its final form.
The flax is laid directly on the floor in rows to the full scale of the field in which it was grown. This piece recreates the process of retting the flax underwent in the field. The audience is invited to walk on top of it, where their weight breaks the flax causing it to crunch. This bodily encounter makes the viewer more acutely aware of their own body and their actions in relation to the flax underfoot. The arrangement of the flax, in referencing a field, also asks the audience to more fully consider the organic matter that materials grow in (many of which we consume). As a crop, flax is a heavy metal accumulator, making it suitable for industrially polluted areas as its root system has a cleansing effect on the soil.
Dirt Field, 2014, kozo bark paper on dirt wall, 48” x 108”

This piece uses the soil collected off the roots of the flax as a paint medium that’s directly applied to the wall. The similar tonal values of the kozo paper and dirt wall make the paper appear as if it could be absorbed back into the ground. Dirt Field references the site where I grew my flax in the summer of 2014.
This bundle of flax fibers has been processed, whereby the fibers were separated from their woody core. Once the flax has been fully dried and cured after the retting process, the flax undergoes further processing using a number of different hand tools. The first step in this process is to use a flax break. This tool has intersecting wooden blades that break the flax into shorter sections by forcing it to bend in a W shape. Next, a scutching knife is used, which further removes the remaining wooden bits by running this knife along the length of the fibers that hang vertically on a wooden board. Finally, the bast fibers are heckled (combed through a bed of nails) that detangles and organizes the fibers uniformly. This fiber references the human body as it looks like hair. By referencing the human body, my intention with this piece is to draw the viewer in for closer inspection through sight, smell and touch.
Flaxen Hair, 2014, processed flax, (installation shot)

This installation shot shows the two wall shelves that house flaxen fibers. The long flaxen fibers that are used for spinning are on the left hand shelf and the tow or shorter fibers that are used in papermaking are on the right hand shelf. This tow is separated during the heckling processed and will be used in papermaking or could be used to spin more coarse fiber. Even though it is of a lower quality, every bit of the flaxen hair is valuable and useful.
Field Station, 2014, Video, 2min loop (video stills)

This video is taken at the field station where I grew my flax. It’s an endless loop showing the flax first standing and then laying flat in the field. The loop is reflective of the rhythmic bodily movements that repeat during pulling of the flax and seed removal. The film’s slow transition, which can go unnoticed, provides a visual representation of the contemplative mental state that is embodied while completing this fieldwork.
This liquid is obtained and saved from the process of cooking leaf material in preparation for papermaking. This liquid is then placed into a holding pool and it changes based on the depth from yellow to orange to deep brown. This liquid has a smell and the audience sees their reflection in the pool. As the show passes the pool evaporates and mold grows across the top, halting the smell. Here the materials agency is apparent: through evaporation in which the viewer breathes in particles of the substance and through the growth of mold. These processes highlight the agency of materials that might otherwise appear inanimate.
Evaporation Pool, 2015, leaf water framed in a holding pool (mold shot)

Evaporation Pool, 2015, leaf water framed in a holding pool, (detail)
This piece is part of a series in which natural dyes are transferred onto paper through direct contact printing. Materials are collected for these prints through gathering naturally available materials when walking through the local landscape. The colours and forms are representative of the season and geographical area. These prints are non-archival and the colours change and fade over time.
Crown (Naturally Occurring Series), 2013, natural dye on watercolour paper, (Detail)
Orb (Naturally Occurring Series), 2013, natural dye on watercolour paper, 48” x 44”
Interview with Aganetha Dyck

Aganetha Dyck is a Canadian artist, who has worked with a variety of materials including felted wool, buttons, cigarettes, and beeswax. I contacted her over the summer of 2014 to discuss how her practice has evolved over time, with a special interest in her longstanding work collaborating with honeybees.

Her work involves placing handmade and found objects into the hive where the bees act upon them. At the beginning of this collaboration, the focus was on the bee's sculptural skills, but this later evolved to encompass broader environmental issues when honeybee colonies began to vanish around the globe. Her artwork and research touches on topics such as Colony Collapse Disorder, neonicotinoids (a class of lethal pesticides), and the decline of family farming. Dyck's work investigates the significance of bees within the human community; instead of setting humans apart from these insects, her work seeks to draw links and find common ground. Her interest in interspecies communication has led Dyck to work with scientists and researchers to create projects that use Braille and bee pheromones as a means to investigate different language systems. Dyck's work has brought bees into the gallery space, where the viewer can watch them work, while being safety separated behind plexiglass. “For Dyck, the bees serve as ‘canaries of the earth,’ indicators of planetary illness.”

This work illuminates the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things, highlighting that biodiversity is key to our survival and that human beings are only one of many species that share the planet.

24 Verna Reid, Women Between: Construction of self in the work of Sharon Butala, Aganetha Dyck, Mary Meigs and Mary Pratt (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2008), 162.
In your earlier works you felted sweaters and canned buttons, engaging in domestic tasks and transforming everyday objects. These pieces dealt with female gender roles; can you elaborate on how this work evolved?

I began working as an artist who altered domestic roles, rules and tools. To explain: I first became an artist while living in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, where I took art lessons in 1975 – 76, from artist and professor George Glenn. George offered me studio space (in the basement of the Herald Building in downtown Prince Albert) along with a few other local artists including the late master weaver, Margaret Van Walsem. I informed George that I did not know enough about art to join a studio, I would not know what to work with, I was just beginning to study...

George asked what I liked doing best at home and I replied: "Laundry". George replied, "Then that is what you can do in a studio. Don’t try to be who you aren’t, you can only make art from who you are, where you come from and what you think."

So you brought a washing machine into your studio and did laundry, leading to your work with felted wool. It’s amazing how this simple action set you off on a course that you would pursue for the good part of a decade.

It's been commented upon that you work intuitively, the previous project being one example of you trusting your instincts. You've encountered many of your materials over the course of your career within your daily life (ex: felted wool, button studio, honey comb signage), as opposed to being sought out. Can you describe your creative process?

My ideas appear to follow me around; this means they appear one after the other as if ordered. The canned buttons project happened after a man dressed in complete business attire, the owner of a button dyeing and manufacturing business, stopped me on the stairs
of the building where I was renting a studio. He asked if I needed studio space - why he stopped and asked that is a mystery - he and I had never met on the stairs prior to this day - he said his business was moving and he needed someone to purchase his old stock of buttons and rent his 3000 square foot, 5th floor space. (I was renting on the 4th floor at the time, working on a project of sculpting with raw sheep's fleece). We went up the stairs to his space where I was blown away by 1500 square feet of buttons in boxes, waist high, plus dyes and equipment in a separate space. He said he wanted $500 for the buttons and the rent was $150 a month. Almost instantly I decided that it was absolutely necessary to rent this space and purchase the stock of old buttons. I knew that I could not afford to rent the entire 5th floor and would have to search for a co-tenant. That evening a friend from a theatre company called me to ask if there was studio space in the building where I was renting. To make a long story short, the next day I went to my bank where the manager loaned me $500. The theatre company rented 1500 sq. ft. of the 3000 sq. ft. space and my husband gave me my first month's studio rent as a birthday gift.

It took me several years to figure out what to do with the glass, leather, wood and old plastic buttons. Plus what to do with boxes of linen thread, the huge supply of long zippers, dyes, and equipment. When the word got out in Winnipeg’s artistic community that as an artist, I had this cache of buttons, interested people came calling. Buttons were traded for art supplies and home baking and some were sold to designers and seamstresses. I read about and experimented with buttons for several years wondering what to do with this cache that totally filled my studio space.

What is your process of experimenting with the materials, that allows for such a lengthy and rich dialogue?

I began experimenting with the button cache by using domestic processes including baking, cooking and canning the buttons. I decided to can the buttons in jars using my grandmother's canner and a hotplate. Most of this experimentation was completed
outdoors. This project led to me to include the use of artist supplies, paper, paint, glue, rhoplex, and glass jars in altering the domestic process more suitable to studio work - or so I thought. When 600 jars were completed I had my son construct 10 wooden cupboards to house the work. The Winnipeg Art Gallery gave me a solo exhibition of CANNED BUTTONS - the Manitoba Arts Council had given me my first major arts grant for the canning project. I had a lot of assistance for this project including from the 'visitors who came for buttons'.

Studio visitors had suggestions for how to create art using the buttons including: sewing buttons all over my clothing, gluing them on a wall, stringing them up, etc., none of which were attempted. Finally as chance would have it, the old (circa 1930's to 50's) button boxes began to break from all the handling by all concerned. This necessitated the relocating of scattered buttons littering the studio floor. I filled new storage containers including old glass jars in which to place the buttons. Placing the buttons into jars reminded me of my foremother's jars of buttons and how, as children, we played with these buttons every time we visited their homes.

I find it interesting you drew upon your childhood memories and heritage for inspiration in the direction of this project.

Thoughts of pioneers home stead ing the bare Canadian prairies led to research on how these brave people survived winter by preserving food - by drying, canning, salting and other processes. My foreparents had larders of preserved food, wooden shelves filled with food of colour and texture that sustained them during the winter months. My parents collaborated in preserving food by creating and planting huge gardens and field crops, constructing basement spaces to house their preserved food of canned goods: dried herbs, wooden barrels of pickles and clay jars of sauerkraut, salted meats and fish. Meat was sourced through butchering of farm animals or hunting of wild animals: deer, moose,
geese and ducks. My family fished the Assiniboine River and smoked the catch in their smoke house. The smoke house consisted of an altered found refrigerator turned smoke chamber. So much invention and labour was necessary in securing their year's food supply - it makes me tired just to think of the work involved. Credit to their ways of being has influenced my career.

**Do you consider the material exhausted before you move on?**

I do not necessarily consider the material exhausted before I move on. On occasion I do have to stop, rearrange or clear my studio before beginning a new project. Definitely my studio was radically revamped upon deciding to work collaboratively with the honeybees, beekeepers, and scientists. I totally emptied the studio, stored older work, gave away supplies and began research into possibilities of creating art works with honeybees.

**What comes first, an issue that’s close to your heart or the fascination of the material itself?**

This is another good question Lynette. Issues close to my heart or ideas that interest me, come first, having said that, with the honeybees it was certainly seeing the beeswax and how the honeybees had sculpted (created 3 dimensional text) with their bees wax that interested me first.

**When you started out working with the bees you were focused on their abilities as sculptors and this later evolved to encompass more ecological concerns.**
I saw honeybees as sculptors when first introduced to them by Gary Hooper from St. Rose du Lac, Manitoba. Gary was a hobby beekeeper who had his bees create signs in honeycomb text. The text was approximately 6 inches in depth. He was the first beekeeper I met who taught me how honeybees construct honeycomb.

Would you go so far as to consider yourself an ecology-based artist? If so, can you pinpoint when this shift took place?

If ecology is nature and environmental issues deal with living beings and nature, then I am interested in ecology and interested in the environment. I do not think of myself as an environmentalist nor an ecologist. I am an artist, not a beekeeper, scientist nor biologist. I cannot pin point a specific time when ecology (nature) or the environment that deals with living beings and nature became of interest to me. Collaborating with the honeybees certainly made me much more aware of how interconnected all living beings and their surroundings are. I see humans and all living beings as part of nature, as part of the environment or part of the ecology. I think my ideas stem from growing up on a farm, roaming the prairies on my bike or walking the land, sitting by the river and dreaming, skating on the river or on the frozen flooded fields. By the way, skating over a frozen stubble field, one can observe living beings in the water beneath. Amazing experiences were had in the springtime just by lingering alongside a ditch filled with water. I lived on a farm until grade 10, and never liked farming per se but loved being free to think and be.

You talk about the interconnectedness of all beings; do global issues affect your work? Take for example: the Monsanto case of 1990 against Percy Schmeiser, a Saskatchewan farmer who had been seed saving and came to possess Monsanto’s genetically modified canola seeds through pollination. Has this or any other event impacted your practice?
Yes, global issues affect my work; gender issues, environmental issues and the daily news affect my art practice. News regarding honeybees, scientific findings (on the internet and elsewhere) of honeybees and CCD (Colony Collapse Disease) influence my work. Yes, following Monsanto’s news makes me ponder and I am curious how suicide seeds will affect our future methods of growing crops. What is meant by seed ownership and the resulting pollination issues? This fascinates me. Fracking and tailings are words that are part of our news; it is all interesting and thought provoking. Our world is full of new ideas that appear to change our daily lives and also change the way we think. I know so very little in regards to these changes.

The **Plexiglass House project**\(^25\) was commissioned by the North Dakota Museum of Art and included a live bee installation. This piece was installed allowing the bees to enter the Plexiglas case while the exhibition was ongoing. Would you spend time talking about this project and how you came to make this piece?

The Director of North Dakota Museum of Art, Laurel Reuter, called regarding an exhibition she was curating that dealt with the disappearing of the prairie landscape: the abandoning of homesteads on the North Dakota prairies. Large corporations or large family farms were taking over the small family farms and leaving farm buildings in neglect. It was a local issue and Laurel offered me a commission that would deal with this issue. The museum had a scale model replica of an abandoned prairie home

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\(^25\) 40,000 honeybees worked on *Plexiglas house* in the North Dakota Museum of Art gallery. This two-person exhibition with Richard Dyck also included *Hive Scans. Plexiglas house* later moved from the gallery to a N.D. farmer’s apiary for a second beekeeping season and then it moved and was completed in Dyck’s apiary studio in Manitoba for a third and final beekeeping season.
constructed. I was asked to give the plexi replica of a deserted and dilapidated North Dakota prairie home to the honeybees.

A beekeeper and I gave the replica to the honeybees and asked them to fill the Plexiglas house with honeycomb.

I know you are very involved with researchers in adjoining fields. How much does this research impact the course of your project?

Researchers impact my work in the most important ways: new methods of working, new ways of seeing the world, new ways of thinking and doing - that is the gift that sharing with researchers has given me.

How do you view yourself as an artist working amongst scientists?

Working with scientists, especially my weeklong residency with Dr. Mark Winston, his assistant Heather Higo and their students at Simon Fraser University was mind boggling to say the least. The people in this lab gave me an unending supply of information and opportunity. Dr. Winston gave me freedom within the lab, I was allowed to use powerful microscopes and fascinating tools, I followed the students as they worked their assignments and worked in the field. This lab experience was absolutely and totally important to my bee work. It was an awesome, generous gift by knowledgeable lab workers, including the honeybees themselves.
It was with Dr. Mark Winston that you did research into bee pheromones?

Yes, I experimented painting with one pheromone from the queen bee to see if the bees would follow her scent. Bees communicate with one another through pheromones, however there are over 16 pheromones and the bees wouldn’t follow this single pheromone scent.

You also completed a piece with Braille entitled *Working in the Dark*\(^26\) and these projects were done in the hopes of communicating with the bees; can you speak to this and discuss the end outcome?

Working with Braille and the people at C.N.I.B. was the result of a blind man's visit to my apiary studio. This blind man and his caregiver approached me in my apiary studio at the St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre (part of Winnipeg’s outskirts). The blind man requested a tour of the bee related studio - he wanted to see the honeybees. I suggested he dress for the occasion - he being in shorts and a t-shirt, socks and running shoes. He refused and said he wanted to see the bees and the sports equipment that I had installed in the hives. He had heard about this project on the news. His caregiver shrugged and said, "He is a grown man, he can do as he pleases". I was totally afraid to take him to the bees, never mind thinking 'how was this blind person going to see the honeybees and the installed sports equipment?’ I was out of my league here. I guided him the last few steps as he approached the first hive. He requested to see a football helmet while the

\(^{26}\) *Working in the Dark* was a project in which Dr. Di Brandt’s poem of 56 lines was transcribed into Braille text, with each line individually *waxed* onto wooden boards, individually measuring 16 inches by 6 inches by 3/4 inch deep. Altering the poem into the Braille language/text - resulted in the blind (and sighted readers of Braille text) being able to read the poem. The honeybees altered the poem's Braille text into beautiful honeycombed lines.
honeybees were working on it. I was totally frightened beyond belief, had my EpiPen handy and opened the hive. The man placed his hands on top of the swarm of bees that had covered the helmet and were busy working their wax onto it. I think I stopped breathing. Then he asked if I had ever let the bees massage my hands. Never. He suggested I remove my bee gloves and give him my hand. I did as requested and he placed my hand gently onto the mass of bees. How he did this without crushing the bees is a mystery. I teared up big time, the experience was life altering, it was amazingly calming; I could not speak. He on the other hand kept moving both his and my hand ever so tenderly all over the bees on the helmet. Neither of us was stung. He removed our hands and thanked me for the experience and we proceeded to go back up the apiary path while I guided him as best I could. I was so moved by this experience; to this day I cannot relate this story without tearing up. This was a gift of seeing like no other.

That is an incredible story and one that helps to differentiate the way people experience the world.

After this experience I visited the Blind Institute of Manitoba, where I met with the Director and staff and discussed the above experience as well as a few ideas of working with blind people. At the time my exhibition at the University of Manitoba was being planned. Curator and professor Serena Keshevjee and I met to decide on a project with the blind people. We decided to give participants from the Blind Institute a special tour of the exhibition, giving them the chance to fully see the exhibition, they would need to touch and feel the art. This idea turned out to be a most successful event and a learning experience like no other for U of M gallery staff, the blind people and for me.

I should add that The Blind institute's staff educated us on how to proceed and how to guide the blind, prior to the exhibition tour. We had to practice being blind via a
blindfold over our eyes; we had to learn to trust our sighted guide. We learned how to
guide the blind into the gallery and how to see with our hands and other senses.

The Blind Institute viewers were the most astute viewers that I have ever met, their
fingers (and noses not too close to the work) roamed the bee related art works with
tenderness and understanding. We all had a positive experience and dialogued about the
bee work and art in general.

Another result of meeting and dialoguing with the blind was a commission I offered to
my friend, poet Dr. Di Brandt, Research Chair of Brandon University. I asked her to
write a poem to the bees. Di was in residence at St. Norbert Centre for the summer so we
dressed in a bee suit, gloves and boots, we visited the honeybees together. Di visited the
apiary almost daily and wrote her poem to the bees. It has been published and she read it
at the opening of my exhibition at DeLeon White Gallery in Toronto.

Collaboration plays a large role in your practice; you’ve not only collaborated with
the bees, but also with your son and other artists. Can you speak to this?

The honeybees and I have collaborated with Richard Dyck in creating HIVE SCANS.
Richard is my son and a Canadian artist who works with computers and creates
interactive art. I also collaborated with Richard Dyck and Canadian photo based artist
William Eakin in a work titled The Wax Museum - a CD production. After my allergy
surfaced I collaborated with William Eakin in a project of installing his collection of
defunct electric ‘decorator’ lamps - the honeybees altered the lamps and we exhibited the
work at the Michael Gibson Gallery in London, Ontario. Images of this work will be
added to my website in the near future.
How has learning of your bee allergy changed the course of your work and will you continue to pursue ecological concerns if you cease to work with bees?

Becoming allergic to honeybee stings might be the honeybees way of suggesting it was time for me to move on, to think broader, to do more research. Over the years I had collected apiary discards including metal Queen Bee excluders and denim hive blankets containing honeybee encrusted marks - marks suggesting ancient text, musical notes, perhaps poetry from the hive. Also over the years the bee work has included the use of these apiary finds.

Now that I am allergic to a honeybee sting, I have begun working solely with these materials in my downtown studio and have closed my apiary studio. A part time studio assistant and I are sewing a full size beekeeper's suit using hive blanket material, linen thread and much hard work. The material is stiff, impregnated with beeswax by the honeybees. I am also crocheting a life size beekeeping suit using pure white sheep's wool. The crocheted suit will be shrunken, by subjecting it to 7 laundry washing machine cycles. My idea is to exhibit these suits side by side or at least within the same exhibition. This exhibition will also include approximately 100 very old wooden, beehive feeder boards. These boards were found in the beekeeper's yard, they were partially framed in wood to fit a hive, they were soiled with bits of dried foliage, dirt and embedded with nails and screws once necessary for their construction. I had the metal parts and broken wooden frames removed. Next my assistant and I brushed the boards clean, washed them of dirt and air-dried them. I have removed some of the wax, left much of the honeybee's marks and will exhibit them in a grid formation.
Another component in this exhibition will be approximately 15, 16 X 16 inch canvasses that I gave to the honeybees the year my allergy to bee stings surfaced. I asked the bees to sign the canvasses as a farewell between us, as a farewell to us working directly with each other. Prior to placing the canvasses into the beehive I had dipped the canvases into the honeybee’s own (melted) wax. The honeybees left honeycomb messages and bee marks on the canvas surface. They signed each canvas as they saw fit, they ignored my suggestion to sign each canvas only on the lower right hand side of the fabric.

You have a beautiful way of taking everything in stride, especially how you see your bee allergy as a sign to move forward in your practice. Where do you think your artwork will lead next?

Where do I go from here? My earlier response to how the bee allergy changed the course of my work touches on this. Beyond that work, I have more research to do regarding working with honeybees from a distance - or not. Over the years, a few of my assistants and collaborators have learned how the honeybees and I work and they could place objects/ideas into the hives for me. We could set up an apiary with me as a guide, using binoculars and giving directions to an assistant, while I maintain a safe distance from the hives. We could also work via computer instructions, iPad communications, Skype; I could work from my downtown studio, the assistant and a beekeeper could be in the rural apiary and we could dialogue from a distance. I have ‘partially’ tried this with some success when I took on a mentoring role in how to work with honeybees in 2011. No decision has been made whether to try this again or not. However this would work no matter the distance between me and an assistant or another artist. It could be an international exchange of ideas and mentoring. I am only at the beginning of not working directly with the honeybees and brainstorm new possibilities.
My artwork is part of today's art's 'slow movement', it takes me a long time of research, thinking and experimenting in order to make a decision regarding a process and a project.


Curriculum Vitae

Lynette de Montreuil

Education:
MFA, University of Western Ontario, 2015
BFA, NSCAD University, 2011

Solo Exhibitions:
2015  *From Dust to Dust*, Artlab Gallery, London, ON
      *Damp Earth*, Petrified Forest Gallery, London, ON
2012  *Naturally Occurring*, Scuttlebutt Gallery, Lunenburg, NS

Selected Group and 2-Person Exhibitions:
2014  *Carte Blanche*, DNA Gallery, London, ON
      *Wish List: Members’ Show and Sale*, Forest City Gallery, London, ON
      *Sum of Two and Three, One more than Four*, Artlab Gallery, Western University, ON
      *Fresh Paint / New Construction*, Art MUR Gallery, Montreuil, QC
2013  *Reflections: A tale of two coasts*, Capilano University, North Vancouver, BC
2012  *Home is more than a place*, Lunenburg Historic Fire Hall, Lunenburg, NS
      *Lunenburg Members Show*, Lunenburg Art Gallery, Lunenburg, NS
      *South Shore Members Show*, Lunenburg Art Gallery, Lunenburg, NS
      *Atlantic Craft and Trade Show*, World Trade & Convention Centre, Halifax, NS
      *In Residence*, Port Loggia Gallery, Halifax, NS
      *Dickens of a Show*, St. John’s Anglican Church, Lunenburg, NS
      *Members Show* Lunenburg Art Gallery, Lunenburg, NS
2011  *NSCAD 2011 Graduation Exhibition*, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, NS
      *Something originates from another*, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, NS
2009  *Works Sited*, Port Loggia Gallery, Halifax, NS
      *Year End Show*, Red Deer Museum and Art Gallery, Red Deer, AB
      *La Salon*, Red Deer College, Red Deer, AB. Organizer
2008  *In Mind*, Art Co-op, Victoria, BC
Residencies:

2011/12 Lunenburg Fire Hall Residency, NSCAD University, Lunenburg, NS

Honours & Awards:

2014-15 SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canadian Graduate Scholarship, Western University
2013-15 Western Graduate Travel Grant, Western University
2013-14 Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University
2013 University of Western Ontario Entrance Scholarship, Western University
2011 NSCAD Community Residency Program Award, NSCAD University
      Alexander J. McDonald Memorial Award, NSCAD University
      David Lanier “Big Hat, No Cattle” Sculpture Scholarship, NSCAD University
2010 Robert Pope Foundation Scholarship, NSCAD University
2009 Affairs of the Arts Recognition Award, Red Deer College
      Student Recognition Award of Excellence, Red Deer College

Related Work Experience:

2013-15 Teaching Assistant, The University of Western Ontario
2012 Continuing Education Instructor, NSCAD University School of Extended Studies
2011 Curatorial Intern for the 2011 Graduation Exhibition, Ann Leonowens Gallery
2011 Production Supervisor, The Works Art and Design Festival
2010-11 Photography Department Assistant, NSCAD University
2010 Production Coordinator, The Works Art and Design Festival
2009 Production Assistant, The Works Art and Design Festival

Publications:

2014 Exhibition Catalogue, *Fresh Paint/New Construction* Catalogue, Art MUR Gallery. Print
2014 Exhibition Catalogue, *Sum of Two and Three, One more than Four*, Artlab Gallery. Print.