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## Gardening at Arm's Length

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

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## Abstract

Combined with a Master of Fine Art thesis exhibition, *Gardening at Arm's Length*, this dossier provides supporting components: an extended artist's statement, documentation of my artwork, an interview with artist Mary Mattingly and my Curriculum Vitae. Throughout the program, I have explored the nature/culture divide and concepts of agency shared by humans and non-humans alike. This work is informed by historical and contemporary artists who are discussed in my artist statement, as well as the theories of place-thought by Vanessa Watts, the dark ecology of Timothy Morton, and the vibrant matter of Jane Bennet. These research components help elaborate on the material investigations undertaken in the studio. My sculptures are based on developing hydroponic systems within assemblages of repurposed objects which support living plants. These sculptures help to highlight the agency of all participants within ecosystems and the acknowledgement of the blended reality of *natureculture*.

## Keywords

Agency, assemblage, ecology, hydroponics, sculpture, art, found objects, natureculture, Jane Bennett, vibrant matter, Timothy Morton, dark ecology, Vanessa Watts, place-thought.

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## Introduction

This Master of Fine Art Thesis Dossier contains three major chapters which are to accompany my thesis exhibition taking place in Western University's ArtLab Gallery from April 14-28, 2017. The three chapters include a Comprehensive Artist Statement, an Interview with artist Mary Mattingly, and documentation of my art production over the course of my degree. This written thesis and the artwork in my thesis exhibition both represent and complement the research undertaken during my Master of Fine Art education.

The first chapter, my Comprehensive Artist Statement, is broken down further into subchapters. Here I will elaborate on the concerns that drive my artistic practice and visual research. Foremost among these issues is my consideration of the interactions between humans and non-human agents. More specifically, I am interested in how we conceive of "nature," and how this term might be dangerous in itself. By separating culture from nature, there is the immediate risk of establishing harmful anthropocentric hierarchies which almost certainly result in detrimental impacts on the biological environment.<sup>1</sup> I begin by describing theoretical and art historical frameworks which inform my practice. I discuss some of the ideas that influence my work, focusing on the agency of non-humans in the world and in art specifically. In particular, I discuss the philosophical work of Vanessa Watts as it pertains to Indigenous worldviews in *place-thought*; Timothy Morton's elucidation of *dark ecology* and the problematic dynamics we have with "nature"; and Jane Bennett's *vibrant materialism* wherein she notes the agency of non-humans. Artists I describe as having an impact on my work include Helen and Newton Harrison, Hans Haacke, Martin Roth and Mary Mattingly. In addition to explicitly philosophical and artistic fields, I am also interested in 'non art' areas of research which inform my life and practice. Other forms of alternative and traditional agriculture, such as permaculture, also influence me in ways that are not explicit in this body of work.<sup>2</sup> I am continually engaged by the ways in which various cultures create meaning around the plants and other entities with which they share direct relationships, and

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<sup>1</sup> "Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration." Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2007), 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Culturally specific forms of gardening are linked to this research, which is predominated by investigations into indigenous techniques from the Americas, such as the Aztec floating gardens known as *chinampas* or the intercropping methods of the *Three Sisters* (Corn, Beans and Squash) by the Iroquois Confederacy.

the ways in which this knowledge is acquired and passed down. These spiritual and religious beliefs sometimes entwine themselves subtly within my work as well.

Following this, I go into some detail about how I incorporate these ideas into my artwork and material strategies. This section deals with both physical and theoretical aspects of my practice. I will describe my specific areas of focus, including a rationale for using hydroponics systems and the specific plants and objects that constitute my sculptures. Hydroponic systems take their place at the forefront of my current investigations, for reasons I will elaborate on later. In addition to hydroponics, I see assemblage as a theoretically relevant framework for my sculptures to work within.

Chapter two contains an interview I conducted with Mary Mattingly in August of 2016. Mattingly is an American sculptor, photographer and installation artist working in New York City. I sought Mary's cooperation initially because I admire her work tremendously, and she has been an ongoing inspiration for my own practice for a number of years. Many of our concerns overlap one another, including ecological urbanism, human relations with non-human agents, materialist consumer cultures, alternative agriculture, and cultural definitions of nature. Our discussion offers an inside perspective on Mattingly's thinking process, along with some illuminating details regarding the early stages of her artistic production. Some of her hopes and aspirations came to the surface during the interview, along with anxieties and potential trepidations.

Chapter three represents a selection of work completed over the course of the program. Included here are a number of sculptures and drawings, with emphasis placed on the former. The projects are included in chronological order, beginning with works produced earliest in the program and concluding with the most recent. Each entry will include a title, date, photo documentation, materials used, and a brief contextual summarization of the project. These summaries are by no means a complete account of my intentions behind works, nor are they intended as didactic explanations of the work in their totality. Rather the text should be used as a tool for assisting the viewer's reading of the work, especially when experiencing it firsthand is not an option. In some cases, these contextual aids are simply used to ask questions about a given project, to provide information about how it was produced, or what conditions inspired its original production.

As an overarching note to all three sections, I wish to here acknowledge that by fostering the growth of living agents in my sculptural systems, a direct conversation is set in

motion between these entities and myself. I acknowledge that this work is being undertaken from a fundamentally flawed and anthropocentric position, but make every effort to engage with the non-human agents in a respectfully multiplicitous fashion, more akin to a partnership or collaboration than a user-tool binary. By engaging in such a relationship, my intention is to provoke subtle feelings of unrest in the viewer and force them to ask themselves questions about their own entanglements in these systems.

## Comprehensive Artist Statement

### **Place-Thoughts, Dark Ecologies and Vibrant Materials**

My primary motivation as an artist and researcher is to encourage discussion around environmental issues in Canada that are often intrinsically polemical. In doing so, I hope to advance knowledge in the evolving field of environmental art, especially where it is concerned with ecological fragmentation and agricultural ethics. I am personally troubled by my culture's treatment of the non-human world. As such, my work is largely a product of those feelings of distrust and apprehension, but also an attempt to reconcile these feelings through hopeful propositions and humourous recontextualization. My aim is to undermine the false dichotomy between humanity and nature through a dually playful and critical lens. I do so in order to establish the importance of a respect for ecology in its many varied forms.

As interdisciplinary researchers, environmentally-minded artists provide mechanisms for objectively observing their relationship with the earth from uniquely positioned viewpoints (Boetzkes, 2010).<sup>3</sup> Current environmental artists sometimes incorporate living plants, animals or other organisms into their artworks. However, these artists have largely overlooked the meaningful relationships that exist between these lifeforms, the inanimate sculptural supports, and the gardener-artist who tends them both. By focusing solely on the functional dimension of these constructive ecosystems, some artists have neglected/downplayed the poetic nuances of the integration of inanimate objects and living beings in their art, thus diminishing the potential impact of this work.<sup>4</sup>

My practice is rooted in dialogue with the work of environmental artists who respond to earlier "land artists" such as Robert Smithson. This second wave of artists were politically motivated and challenged some of the problematic practices of their predecessors. These practitioners included the likes of the Harrisons, Agnes Denes, Alan Sonfist, Hans Haacke and Ana Mendieta. These artists developed a critical exchange with environmental science and sometimes employed absurdity in their work to highlight

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<sup>3</sup> Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 105.

<sup>4</sup> Brooke Kamin Rapaport, "Plant Art: Is There Room to Grow?," in *The New Earthwork: Art, Action, Agency*, ed. Twylene Moyer and Glenn Harper. (International Sculpture Centre Press, 2011), 180.



important issues. I respond to this second wave of environmental artists in both a respectful and challenging spirit, just as they responded to the first land artists. The artists I will discuss below form the core of the influences in my overall thesis project. After describing the work of artists and thinkers that my practice references, I will describe my own process in more depth. However, I first need to address the concept of “agency” in my work.

Definitions of “agency” vary, but generally speaking it refers to the capacity of an actor to act, although whether or not this implies that any sort of will or consciousness has been thoroughly debated. This idea has been morphed into varying levels of “intention” by a number of philosophers including Vanessa Watts, Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton, all of whom I will discuss here. In their writing, these thinkers imply that non-humans are capable of affecting their environment and other actors, including humans. This seems straightforward enough until one realizes how difficult it is to fully articulate this position within the biased linguistic framework surrounding non-human agents in Western-centric philosophies. Nonetheless, I will attempt to do so by articulating non-human agency through the term ‘co-actant’. Within Western philosophy, the idea of agency being a trait that is shared by things other than humans has been around for centuries in the philosophies of Baruch Spinoza, Henry David Thoreau, Henri Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari, and of particular importance for my thesis, in the works of Bennett and Morton (who have also cited the aforementioned thinkers as influential in their own work).<sup>56</sup> Below, I address some recent elucidations of the concept of agency and its implications, including current considerations of Indigenous worldviews. Working with these ideas in mind, I want my work to establish a tangible acknowledgement of what Donna Haraway has called ‘natureculture.’<sup>7</sup> *Natureculture* is the term that Haraway uses to describe the indivisibility of ecological relationships, in addition to the reality that such relationships are socially constructed as coevolutionary byproducts.<sup>8</sup> However, long before contemporary notions of

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2007), 7, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (London UK, Duke University Press, 2010), 21-24.

<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway. *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*. Chicago IL, Prickly Paradigm Press. 2003.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 8, 29, 63.

a fused *natureculture* were theorized, there were other ideas derived straight from the land itself.

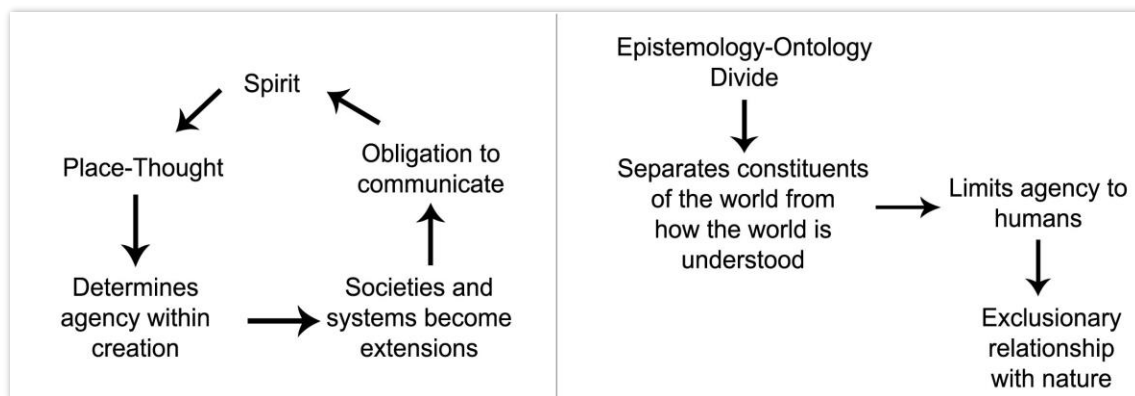
In response to the terms surrounding “agency” introduced above, I put forward the concept of *co-actants* as the definition of the non-humans that I involve in my work. I wish to contribute to this discourse in a unique way by fostering an intimate relationship with the viewer, artist and lifeforms within the sculptures. These lifeforms are not simply *inert* materials as was suggested by the actions of early Land Artists, nor are they specimens to be exploited. The mere implication of control over these beings is somewhat absurd, and this absurdity has become an element in my work. Rather than referring to them as only “materials” for my sculptures, I see them as *co-actants* that exhibit their own agency within the work. They are also integral components of the wider environmental systems in which we cohabit. I work *with* them to create a thought-provoking experience for the viewer.

I want to acknowledge that many of these concerns about the agency of non-humans have been addressed through various Indigenous cosmologies and for centuries if not millennia. Vanessa Watts clearly deals with some of these issues in her article *Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)*. Watts deals with the problematic discourse surrounding Western philosophical discussions of the non-human, primarily embodied within the Cartesian proclamation “I think therefore I am.”<sup>9</sup> She specifically addresses the histories (not mythologies) of the Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. The concept of *place-thought* is the core of Watts’ discussion, an idea founded on the principle that agency is derived from the land itself and therefore society is composed of all of nature, not humans exclusively.<sup>10</sup> Humans and non-humans all come from the land and are manifestations of its spirit, and in this way all beings are connected by their origins. In Watt’s Table [1.1] below, the idea of *place-thought* is shown to directly oppose the Epistemological-Ontological Divide found in Western philosophy.

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<sup>9</sup> Vanessa Watts. “Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!).” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 2.1 (2013): 24.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 20.



**Table 1.1 Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee Cyclical Framework vs. Eurocentric Hierarchical Framework.<sup>11</sup>**

One thing that I especially admire in this Anishnaabe framework as described by Watts is the integration of philosophy into daily life, as opposed to the rigorously academic (almost exclusively so) philosophies of the European West, which often exclude large numbers of those who most need to understand them. It has also been helpful for me to consider the role of art and artists as being related to that of the ‘trickster’ from Indigenous histories; as an intellectual force that exists outside the realm of normal human behaviour.<sup>12</sup> While I do not *yet* claim to be on the path to the decolonized equalization of agency mentioned by Vanessa Watts, the idea that there should be an obligation to act in solidarity with the concerns of non-humans resonates deeply with me.<sup>13</sup>

In my sculptures, I emphasize not only the agency of plants and our reliance on them, but also the integral nature of soil as a tangible agent. I omit the use of soil in my sculptures and instead use hydroponics as a critical reflection on soil erosion. I see this use of hydroponics as simultaneously humorous and mournful; an absurd absence of soil resulting in placeless non-site, a memorial. Even my drawings during my thesis work are based on mediated agricultural methods, including industrial hydroponics and greenhouse

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that I do not make this connection as an appropriative gesture; such as Watts has accused Haraway of making by her use of indigenous “mythologies” rather than “histories”. Rather, this reflects my efforts to understand the place of art in the overall eco-cultural narrative.

<sup>13</sup> Watts, 20-34.

architecture as subjects. My work reflects on the existential relationship we have with soil and the land, as well as the plants and animals who depend on it for their survival. If our agency does indeed derive itself from the land, then soil erosion is a crisis which must be taken seriously. I also see the use of soil in industrial agriculture as related to hydroponics and non-site because of the heavy reliance on chemical inputs and irrigation that turn the land into nothing more than a growth medium or biologically inert substrate.<sup>14</sup> I consider certain environmental artists, such as Helen and Newton Harrison, and Hans Haacke, to have strong relationships with the idea of communicating on behalf of the land.

In the following paragraphs, I offer examples of historical projects that address issues that are also present in my own practice. The work of Newton and Helen Harrison primarily interests me because of their commitment to DIY ethics, sustainable self-reliance, global environmental crises and their artistic challenging of the sterile white of the gallery cube.<sup>15</sup> Initially, it was the *Survival Pieces* (1970-72) that drew me to the Harrisons' work. This series of four related projects include *Hog Pasture: Survival Piece #1*. The Harrisons describe this work as follows:

In the exhibition, which was held in mid-Winter, the green of the work, the smallness of the room, the quality of the light, the odor of the air attracted a continuing audience. The earth was made as part of the earlier earth-making ritual. As a consequence for a while, hog pasture grew at about half an inch a day. We attempted to introduce a small hog to our pasture. The museum refused.<sup>16</sup>

This project and the Harrisons' other *Survival Pieces* highlight the realities of resource-intensive agricultural production and remind us viscerally of food's origins in an often battered and unmanaged environment. The Harrisons also considered problematic ethical territory in these survival projects with the harvesting of plants and animals as food for humans. However, I believe that the commitment with which the Harrisons conduct these experiments in sustainable independent living have more to do with pragmatism and self-sufficiency than any broader critique of anthropocentric misconduct. In addition to

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<sup>14</sup> Hydroponic mediums are neutral substrates which support the roots of plants and act as a permeable material through which the nutrient solution passes.

<sup>15</sup> T. J. Demos. *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. Sternberg Press. 2016. 41-42.

<sup>16</sup> The Harrison Studio. "Hog Pasture: Survival Piece #1, 1970-71" accessed December 13, 2016. <http://theharrisonstudio.net/hog-pasture-survival-piece-1-1970-71>.

addressing ethical issues of animal harvest for consumption, these *Survival Pieces* also seem to engage with a degree of humour in the way they demystify the gallery and turn it into a literally productive space.

I similarly admire the work of Hans Haacke because of his engagement with politics in an incisive and critical manner. *Rhinewater Purification Plant* (1972) is an example of this practice as well as an acknowledgment of the tangled relationship between the environment and human technologies.<sup>17</sup> Inside the Museum Haus Lange, Haacke purified sewer discharge from a plant in Krefeld, Germany before pumping it out of the building and into the museum's gardens. This instance of grey water reclamation brings attention to the ongoing damage caused by the return of undertreated sewage back into the Rhine river.<sup>18</sup> Haacke views systems not in terms of a reliance on perception by humans, but through their biological, social and physical functions - an idea which I share.<sup>19</sup> He also says the "difference between 'nature' and 'technology' is only that the latter is man-made."<sup>20</sup> This statement also connects with my ideas about the narrowly defined boundaries between nature and culture.

Beyond these historical references to artists, I am also informed by contemporary thinkers and visual practitioners. Specifically, I am attempting to reconcile the shortcomings that my practice still embodies in terms of the hierarchal treatment of non-humans as I work as a gardener almost as much as an artist. In the following paragraphs I will detail the thinkers and artists who inform my work in terms of their relationship and considerations of the non-human.

Timothy Morton is a Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of California who often writes on the philosophy of ecology. He refers to the paradoxical concept that we have to renegotiate our definitions of 'nature' in order to become truly integrated with an ecological sensibility that he refers to as 'dark ecology' or 'nature

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<sup>17</sup> Demos, 47-48.

<sup>18</sup> Green Museum. "Hans Haacke, Rhinewater Purification Plant, 1972 Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany © VGBild-Kunst". Accessed December 6, 2016. <http://www.greenmuseum.org/c/ecovention/rhine.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Kastner, *Nature: Documents of Contemporary Art series*. (London UK, Whitechapel Gallery, 2012), 29.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, 28.

without ecology.<sup>21</sup> Morton claims that the term “nature” itself is what is problematic, in that it allows for a continuation of the human separation from the environment. An example of Morton’s argument for respecting the needs of all entities in a system is that “It is better for environmentalism to think in terms of *collectivism* rather than *holism*. A collective does not imply an organic whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Indeed, ecology without nature rules out holism.”<sup>22</sup> Morton seems to think that *holism* is dangerous because it homogenizes unique systems into a singular entity, where none of the parts can even be considered without referring to the whole, whose sum is considered to be greater than any single component. Simply put, for Morton, *holism* ignores the human capacity for self-harm, whereas *collectivism* implies a respect for the multifaceted functioning of the grander system. In the conclusion of his book, Morton calls on environmental thinkers to acknowledge our place within nature, *politicize the aesthetic* (even through humour and irony) and to maintain the distance between ourselves and non-humans to avoid the dangers of holism.<sup>23</sup>

Jane Bennett is a Professor of Political Theory and Chair of the Department of Political Science at John Hopkins University. She generally writes on the ethical concerns of nature, but in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, she addresses the agency of non-humans specifically. Her central argument throughout the book is for a ‘vital materiality,’ which for Bennett is an acknowledgement of the value of non-humans through their *vitality*, which is a sort of embedded agency inherent to all things.<sup>24</sup> One of the ideas supporting this vitality is that no single body ever acts in isolation, “agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.”<sup>25</sup> Bennett mentions that the agents we encounter in our daily lives also physically incorporate themselves into our very being, through *processes* such as digestion and by *extensions* such as the billions of bacteria that our bodies host; many of which we could not survive

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<sup>21</sup> “Dark Ecology” is also referred by Morton to be not opposed to deep ecology, but cheekily considers it instead a “really deep ecology” Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2007), 143.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 102.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 204-205.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (London UK, Duke University Press, 2010), xiii, 13.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 21.

without.<sup>26</sup> She expresses how this overlapping agency has always been a reality, whether or not it is recognized as such: “There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and non-humanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore”.<sup>27</sup> I see this ‘mingling’ as related to Morton’s collectives and attempt to acknowledge this amalgamated reality by combining found and living elements into assemblages. While I am skeptical about how widely this mingling is acknowledged, it seems impossible to ignore its existence.

At this point, there are many contemporary artists working with living entities. Some use them as conceptual props for painting or sculptures; others use them as elastic material bases to manipulate in various forms of bioart. The artists who are of most concern to me are those engaging directly with the non-human entities living within their work. In respect to the specific idea of *co-actants*, I will here focus on two artists that have directly influenced my thesis work: Martin Roth and Mary Mattingly. These two artists not only engage with ideas of agency, but they do so in absurd and humourous ways that undermine nature/culture binaries. Likewise, in my work I use absurd humour both as a critical tactic for engagement and as a vehicle for the germ of an idea. Humour is my tool for lowering defensive barriers and for opening the viewer’s mind to radical paradigm shifts, such questions of agency, and the erasure of nature/culture dichotomies. In this way, I use my work to expose viewers to issues in a critical light, affecting opinions empathetically rather than angrily preaching about environmental plight.

In the case of Martin Roth, a very specific sort of poetic sculptural tactic is used to transmit ideas almost subliminally. A combination of sculpture, installation and performance is used to create situations that reposition the viewer toward non-humans in a reimagined way. Specifically, his engagement with animals, plants and insects interests me, and especially his use of a light-hearted but impactful sincerity. Roth deals with the permeable boundary between nature and culture in ways that reflect a subtle humour while alluding to much wider concerns about the place of humans in the environment. His work places the artist as the primary agent, but encourages an earnest exchange with the lifeforms involved. I particularly envy Roth’s talent for titling his work; inserting himself through

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 102.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 31.

the use of “I” in nearly all of his titles; tackling issues that are at once challenging and beautiful in a manner; implicating the responsibilities of himself and the viewer as well.

In *I created a natural soundscape for my bonsai* (2013), Roth places a bonsai atop a plinth flanked by hifi speakers emitting a typically romanticized collection of nature sounds. When the viewer continues downstairs to the next room they are faced with terrariums, aquariums and cages along with the contained lizards, fish and birds. These enclosures also have small microphones suspended in close proximity. It is at this point the realization is made that the soundtrack being played for the bonsai is being transmitted live from this second room. This scenario can be applied to Morton’s ideas surrounding dark ecology. Here Roth helps to collapse the distance between the viewer and the non-human elements of his work, and, one could argue, acting as a facilitator of Morton’s *collectivism*. For Roth, “The work dramatizes this life force as being alienated from itself; abstracted and fed into the sterile context of the art gallery. Visitors, too, are implicated in this economy: if they go downstairs, their voices become part of the menagerie of sound transmitted to the bonsai, both part of this ecology and intruders to it.”<sup>28</sup>

As I have previously indicated, my primary artistic resonance is with the work of Mary Mattingly. She places a strong emphasis on ecology and redirecting the public perception of our relationship with the environment. As an artist and gardener, she is not only in direct physical contact with the plants in her sculptures, but she also brings them into contact with her viewers. Here, Mattingly seems to embody Bennett’s ideas of *vital materiality* and the agency of non-humans. Through digestion, the plants which had been a part of Mattingly’s sculptures become a part of our bodies in a unification of human and non-human agency into one being.<sup>29</sup> I find myself drawn to her aesthetic of reused materials which help to infuse both a narrative sense and a critical absurdity.

*Swale* (2016) is characteristic of Mattingly’s large sculptural installations. It is made mostly from reused materials that are combined to create a structure to support plants. Here, a 130-foot-long construction barge is used as a floating platform for an itinerant food forest garden, which is docked at the Brooklyn Bridge Park Pier 6. I discuss this project in

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Roth. “I created a natural soundscape for my bonsai”. Accessed December 2, 2016. <http://martinroth.at/en/i-created-a-natural-soundscape-for-my-bonsai/>.

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, 39-51.



detail with Mary during our interview discussion in Chapter 3, but will point out some features key to my arguments here. This brief manifesto-like statement sums up the project perfectly:

Swale is an artwork. Art is integral to imagining new worlds. By continuing to create and explore new ways of living, we hope that Swale will strengthen our ways of collaborating, of cooperating, and of supporting one another. At its heart, Swale is a call to action. It asks us to reconsider our food systems, to confirm our belief in food as a human right, and to pave pathways to create public food in public space. New York City has approximately 30,000 acres of public park space compared to 100 acres of community garden space that are varied degrees of "public". Together, let's reimagine public space.<sup>30</sup>

As exemplified here in this call to action, what strikes me about Mattingly is her commitment to the causes she engages in her work. Here, she describes food's essential role for humanity, which clearly aligns her with the *vibrant materialism* of Bennett. In the interview with Mary, we discuss her acknowledgement that humans and plants exist separately, but that their relationship creates lasting impressions on both groups. I believe that scale is used by Mattingly in a subtle but effective way. As one stands on her floating installations, the gentle rocking and shifting of the structures beneath one's feet echoes the instability and uneasiness of the issues Mattingly concerns herself with. She encourages participants to actively engage with the work rather than being passive viewers. This can entail physically engaging with the work (often by eating the food produced there), or even volunteering to help with the functioning of the 'vessel'.

While I admire the direct engagement of Mattingly's participatory floating sculptures, I also enjoy the poetic nuance of Martin Roth's sculptural installations. I see both as working tangibly with the frameworks put forward by Timothy Morton and Jane Bennett. Both Morton's *collectivism* and Bennett's *vibrant materialism* are clearly at play in the amalgamated natural/cultural realities these artists present. Despite my admiration for Mattingly and Roth, I do not seek to strike a balance between their distinct practices within my own. Rather, I intend to learn what I can from their best practices while continuing to challenge the hierarchal structures that Roth and Mattingly still paradoxically occupy. Still, it is also possible that despite my best efforts, this problem is unavoidable. I also do not strive to illustrate the philosophies of Bennett, Morton and Watts, but all of

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Mattingly. "What is Swale?". Accessed December 2, 2016. <http://www.swaleny.org/>.

these thinkers influence my work just as I see their ideas in the artworks I have discussed above. In the next section, I will elaborate on my implementation of the ideas described above in some of my influences.

### **Material Strategies**

Considering the above, it is easy to see how one might become disillusioned with the state of environmental relations in the capital driven logic of Western thought. Here, I will describe how, by working through a critical humour, my artwork erodes the edifice of human exceptionalism in order to establish a respectful and pluralistic ecology. My material practice currently manifests itself in several ways. First, there is research and drawing that directly results from a hands-on learning process. Some of these are purely propositional material or conceptual investigations, while others act as plans for sculptural projects. Second, this research and drawing practice is given form as sculptural habitats. These take the form of life support apparatuses built from carefully chosen, symbolic objects. Third, in a culminating act, I populate these habitats with plants that act as *co-actants*, which I alluded to earlier, but will now define as active agents with whom the space of the artwork is shared. This is the step that truly animates the sculptures and quite literally infuses them with life, and in keeping with ideas in *The Ethics of Earth Art* by Amanda Boetzkes, it emphasizes the importance of sensorial engagement in art.<sup>31</sup> By including these living components, my sculptures engage many senses and encourage viewers to consider their reciprocal relationship with the environment.

In my sculpture, I use a range of objects with common cultural associations, repurposing them as habitats and conceptual support systems to subvert and re-contextualize them as parts of functioning ecosystems. Additionally, by reusing these objects which would otherwise be discarded I circumvent the waste stream in a dually critical and practical manner. In this way, assemblage becomes not only a way of working, but also acknowledges the interdependencies between each component of the system, which is an ethic informed by Bennett's *vital materialism*. I see the potential for these

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<sup>31</sup> Boetzkes, 178-179.

objects to be used for something wholly different than their original purpose. This modification of context is the most significant change I implement. Physically, the objects are not heavily altered, although in some instances there is more manipulation than in others. My approach here is pragmatic and functional. I search for technical solutions for problems with an ethic that prioritizes simplicity.

I consider the plants and other natural elements involved in my sculpture to be *co-actants* who claim agency by their ability to change the appearance and effect of the work. I choose specific plants for projects based largely on their utilitarian relationship to humans as well as their relationship to the objects they will inhabit. Some examples of this utilitarian relationship include: coffee arabica used for brewing coffee; softwood trees harvested for lumber; and the Three Sisters pairing (corn, beans and squash), consumed as food.<sup>32</sup> Organisms are treated much differently when a practical human application for them has been identified. In some cases, this difference is manifested in a respectful way, as in various Indigenous traditions, but many societies treat “useful” life forms with little regard beyond their properties as resources to be consumed. In his book *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard describes the Indigenous beliefs in an ‘enspirited world’ as ‘animistic belief systems’ which were devastatingly interrupted by Euro-American culture; similar to my earlier references to *place-thought* with Vanessa Watts.<sup>33</sup> Garrard also mentions that this unbalanced power dynamic historically has led to what he describes as ‘ecological imperialism.’<sup>34</sup> In my work, I seek to directly challenge this consumption-based relationship with non-humans by working outside this form of subjugation.<sup>35</sup> Working with a range of plant species is challenging, but has helped me gain a broader understanding of

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<sup>32</sup> The “Three Sisters” agricultural system widely used among Indigenous peoples in North America, notably the Iroquois Confederacy. The grouping was a companion planting strategy used to benefit all the plants involved. The corn acted as a trellis for the beans to climb, the beans affix nitrogen to the soil to increase fertility and the squash act as a ground cover, preventing both weeds and certain pests.

<sup>33</sup> *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*. New York NY, Routledge, 2011. 130.

<sup>34</sup> The term ‘ecological imperialism’ is exemplified by the supplantation of the native American prairie ecosystem, including long grasses and buffalo, by European biota - crops, short grasses and livestock. *ibid*, 133.

<sup>35</sup> I also recognize the problematic relationship I have to some of these ideas as a white man of mixed settler descent. Zoe Todd, elaborates on how posthumanism in the white, Eurocentric academic world is an ongoing problem because it erases racial issues and non-European worldviews. I respect Todd’s viewpoint, but I also try here to meaningfully reflect upon a range of worldviews on equal ground. I have striven for what Todd calls an ‘ethical relationality.’ Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, 241-254. Anexact Publishers. 2015.

the cultural reliance relatively few species. This spectrum of plants has also provided me with a variety of sculptural and technical strategies to deal with each unique situation in a specific way.

I primarily work within the framework of hydroponic systems as life support. Hydroponics are inherently artificial and help to further complicate the reading of these projects as outrightly environmental. The ethical ambiguity of hydroponics is genuinely interesting to me in relationship to the impossibility of flawlessness in contemporary art. For example, hydroponic systems remove plants from the environmental specificity of biozone habitats, creating a sort of non-space. I consider this quality to be strongly related to the assumed neutrality of many art institutions which place art in a white cube removed from external cultural references. As Brian O’Doherty alludes in his book about the ideologies of exhibition spaces, the gallery becomes a sort of timeless, limbo-like space where artwork is ghettoized and quarantined.<sup>36</sup> By placing the utilitarian, but more biologically modified, plants (such as coffee) in a human-generated system like hydroponics, I focus attention on the artifice inherent in agricultural systems. This action mirrors how the strangeness of art is made more evident by the gallery’s subtraction of external contexts under the pretext of allowing the artwork to breathe.<sup>37</sup> However, I also attempt to rearticulate the relationship of the plants in a more directly reciprocal way. Despite limitations such as these, I am still drawn to hydroponics as a DIY technique for growing which encourages a close observation of the system and a level of nurturing not present in larger scale agriculture. For me, hydroponics relates to Morton’s ideas of “ecology without nature,” in that they are comprised of human and non-human elements combined in a singular, functioning system. In this way, my sculptures also operate like Morton’s *collectives* in the way that I create and facilitate the operation of a micro-scale environment which acknowledges the interdependencies of all the constituent parts, thereby overruling *holism*. This observation is essential for my reworking of the viewer’s perception of nature, as the hydroponic system becomes a stand-in or microcosm of more complex ones at play outside the gallery.

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<sup>36</sup> Brian O’Doherty. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. San Francisco, CA, The Lapis Press. 1986. 15, 80.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 14.

Environmentally speaking, soil is a precious resource that is in a precarious state. Almost half of the Earth's terrestrial surface is used for agricultural purposes, which has led to unsustainable nutrient and water consumption as well as intensive inputs of chemical fertilizers.<sup>38</sup> In Canada specifically, leaving land fallow (unsown) to replenish organic content, nutrient levels and moisture content is a practice on the decline which leaves soil vulnerable to wind and water erosion.<sup>39</sup> This uncertainty regarding the continued viability of soil is another part of my rationale for exploring hydroponics; not as a solution to our problematic relationship with non-humans but as a dystopian reality with a prospective future of vastly depleted soil resources. In some ways, one could consider my work a sort of dystopian form of gardening. Hydroponic systems are not site specific; they act in direct opposition to this idea. This makes them ideal as a critique of any agricultural solutions which do not act in dialogue with their site, as an extension of the will of the land. Industrial agriculture thus operates in a way that undermines connections with a specific site. I use hydroponics as a way of extending this sitelessness into the gallery; another sort of non-space that alienates art from its context, but also acts as a sort of life support for the artworks that populate it.<sup>40</sup> I use the term 'sitelessness' not only to describe a sort of deprivation of ecological context, but also as a reference to the land being washed and blown away by erosive natural forces which are exacerbated by human agricultural practices.<sup>41</sup> By bringing the viewer into contact with these systems in the gallery, I attempt to refocus the contact with non-humans that Michel Serres believes to be severely diminished.<sup>42</sup> As such, hydroponics are as much a conceptual tactic as a medium; operating both to sustain the lives of the plants and the attention of the viewer.

The Harrisons partly motivated my move towards hydroponics and my thoughts concerning soil in a project entitled *Making Earth* (1970). Where the Harrisons attempt to combat soil loss by producing living dirt, I reinforce the idea of a dystopian future without useable earth through the use of hydroponic systems. Even the Harrisons soon abandoned

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<sup>38</sup> Science Daily. "Threats to soil productivity threaten food security". last modified May 7, 2015. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/05/150507165404.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Soil Conservation Council of Canada. "Summerfallow acres continue to decline". Last modified September 23, 2004. [http://www.soilcc.ca/ggmp\\_news\\_releases/2004/2004-13.php](http://www.soilcc.ca/ggmp_news_releases/2004/2004-13.php).

<sup>40</sup> O'Doherty, 66-67.

<sup>41</sup> An example of such a destabilizing agricultural practice would be the use of mechanical tillage.

<sup>42</sup> Serres Michel, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson. Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 1995. 28-29.

their small-scale batches of earth-making in favour of projects that highlighted the importance of protecting existing soil.<sup>43</sup> The result of such approaches is that the sculptural habitats I build often balance a machine-like appearance with systems that nurture pockets of life. By developing these absurd living and breathing ecosystems, I visualize meaningful microcosms which invoke the complicated environmental and cultural issues present beyond the exhibition space, yet do so on a more comprehensible scale for the sake of engaging a viewer more substantially in conversation. This ‘collective conversation’ is essential to acknowledge of the interconnectedness of all systems.

Considering all of this, my aim is to create works that reach the viewer through humour and physical, multisensory engagement. I have chosen to work in a hopeful, albeit critical way to combat my inner feelings of distrust and apprehension. Acknowledging non-human agency by working in a systems-based, sculptural conversation, I hope to establish the importance respectful ecological thinking and the interconnections we share with other agents. Vanessa Watts considers conversation a human obligation, and I agree with her assertion.<sup>44</sup> I favour this open approach when compared to more confrontational, ‘preachy’ artworks which can alienate potential allies. The content of my thesis exhibition deals with small moments within the impossibly complex perceptual relationship we share with the living environment.

Society is entangled in a vast ecological web, from which there is merely a *mental* rather than *actual* separation of humanity from the rest of Earth’s biosphere. We can no longer maintain the position that culture is separate from nature because they always have and always will be completely intertwined.<sup>45</sup> Aside from Morton’s central concepts of dark ecology and collectivism is his consideration of the artist as a *facilitator*. He states, “genius is relocated outside the artist, who becomes the facilitator, the conductor. The artist establishes certain parameters, then watches to see what will happen.”<sup>46</sup> This is an idea which resonates with my work as an amateur artist-gardener. I experiment with various

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<sup>43</sup> The Harrison Studio. Making Earth, 1970” accessed December 13, 2016. <http://theharrisonstudio.net/making-earth-1970>.

<sup>44</sup> Watts, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Demos, 116-117.

<sup>46</sup> Morton, 190.

forms of hydroponics and alternative gardening methods and work reflexively in response to how the plants adjust and grow inside their constructed habitats.

I use subversive and nurturing humour to establish an open, conversational relationship with the viewer about these entanglements. However, my practice is limited in its perceptual scope by its location within an anthropocentric epoch, which undoubtedly influences my tactical decisions to position the work within the realm of human experience and relatability. I see this limitation as an inevitable one given my aims in undertaking this artistic research; relating back to the viewer's relationship with these sculptural ecosystems. However, this is also an *ongoing* process in which I am striving to unite my obligations to the land and my culture. Finally, I hope to foster a sense of caregiving in opposition to the dominant trends of apathetic consumption of biological life, thereby contributing to a long line of thinking about wider ideas of the complicated nature/culture construct. I expect this dialogue to address the never-ending shortcomings of both artistic and broader societal views of nature in an atmosphere of reciprocity and engaging conversation.

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## Transcribed Interview with Mary Mattingly

. Interview conducted via Google Call, Dunnville, ON, Canada – New York City, NY, USA. 7 pm August 1, 2016

### **Introduction**

Mary Mattingly is an American artist living and working in New York City. For years, Mattingly has been working with repurposed objects and constructed ecosystems, with a particular interest in food security and the commodity/waste stream found in capitalist economies. I contacted her to discuss our shared interest in non-human agency, her large sculptures, and the socially engaged themes in her work.

In our interview, Mattingly and I discuss themes ranging from posthumanity to hope in a dystopian reality. We also speak in some detail about the socially engaged nature of her large floating sculptures, as sites for community development and discussions surrounding urban foraging and gardening. While social engagement is a subtext in my work, I admire how Mattingly has been able to make it such a cohesive element in her artwork. Despite the potential for considering the hopefulness in her work as naïve, Mattingly pursues direct action in the face of sometimes overwhelming bureaucratic barriers.

Mary Mattingly has shown extensively both in the United States and internationally. She has also been the recipient of many public and private awards and grants. I thank Mary for the gracious gift of her time, and for the deeply thoughtful responses she gives during the interview.

**Paul Chartrand:** I thought we could start with this idea of posthumanity that seems to run strongly through your work. You have mentioned how “We are probably doomed as humans if we don’t start thinking in a post-human way” (Art 21 documentary). Can you explain this statement further, perhaps more specifically, about how we can think in a non-human way that will actually *protect* humanity?

**Mary Mattingly:** At that moment I was considering posthumanism not as though it were time *after* humans, but rather within the scope of object-oriented ontology. We can potentially change the way we interface with the objects of the world as humans if we cared more about the process of how these same objects are made (or not made). I think about the life of objects in relation to how they are produced, distributed, used and eventually discarded. Another major concern of mine is thoughtfulness regarding energy use throughout the various stages of the supply chain.

**PC:** You often use specific plants and objects together in your sculptures, do you consider them to have an embedded agency of their own? If so, how do you negotiate this when working with such vibrant material?

**MM:** I think that it’s important to learn as much as possible about the histories and present conditions of the plants I work with before using them, to gain a better understanding of their cultural meanings. I do believe the objects have their own agency but I also think their effects can be even more significant once they are considered within their relationship to humans or machines (or both). In this way they remain *with* us in some form, to impress themselves upon us and vice versa. Sometimes the agency is perceived by humans to be derived from those whose hands have been on the objects, who have come into contact with them, but I am still trying to understand this. They are still agents operating independently of humans or other living objects without necessarily having come into contact with them.

I regard most of the objects in my life for a time as being sort of precious, while understanding that some of them will eventually be consumed in some way. I try to balance this with being more mindful about my consumption habits and share impressions regarding this. The constructed sculptural habitats I build have begun to mirror and influence how I live my everyday life. Spending so much time in these sculptures has altered the way I live even in my apartment. For example, when considering what to throw away (which very rarely happens now) the decision has become much more ethical for me. I like to see how things that I perceive as precious can be transformed and have their utility preserved. Whether they can be used for something new; resituated in a new space of meaning.

**PC:** With these large sculptural projects, such as your currently exhibited *Swale* (in New York City), there is often a strong sense of collaboration, fostering dialogue and creating opportunities for joint learning for yourself and others. The desire to learn and engage in productive discourse is evident, as well as embodying a particular ethic, but it does not overwhelm potential readings of the work. There is room to breathe and interpret. How does your work engage with the pedagogical impulse without it taking over and becoming preachy environmentalist rhetoric?

**MM:** It really comes down to approaching projects in levels. It's interesting you mention *Swale* in this context because we were really trying to work to collaboratively navigate through some problematic urban policy barriers. It was especially interesting to site the project on the water because there are different levels of governing bodies for those spaces. We are really trying to open up boundaries to facilitate a certain level of education on edible and medicinal plants which can be found locally in significant quantities. So *Swale* has started to deal with this space between service and art. I try to steer it away from pure service, and towards a sense that this type of education and self sufficiency could become widespread practice around the city. That conversation becomes more important than the actual "doing" within the project, partly because of the bureaucratic limitations on these practices in urban areas.

Part of this project has also been a wider engagement with organizations that maintain some of these regulations regarding urban foraging. Some of those laws make sense to governing bodies because they can prevent people from getting sick and pursuing legal action. There are also concerns about the chemicals used in parks and whether people could consume those by foraging, despite the fact that even simple recreational uses such as sitting on herbicide laden grass can be quite toxic as well. What I am learning from that is that the process of traversing these legal barriers is long and difficult, but result in engaging conversations that make the effort worthwhile. You can finally engage people about the concept of food as a right instead of as property or as commodity! So to have this huge floating sculpture which is not property, but rather a sort of service project/ artwork/ proposal hybrid where people can experience their surroundings in challenging ways.

**PC:** Deeply engaging audiences is clearly a part of your work. How has collaboration manifested within your practice? Could you describe some of the logistics of working on such massive public projects in such a demanding bureaucratic setting [New York City]?

**MM:** Working on the water forces you to approach certain legal bodies who govern that extra-urban space. This shifts when you dock in particular areas where you might be required to work with the Parks Department or the Port Authority. Governors Island for example is now a state governed entity which exists somewhere between a corporation and a land trust. So all these levels of governmental interaction really add up. This process has become easier to navigate after years of experience with the specific nature of each bureaucratic body. Some organizations are beginning to realize that someone [including artists] with enough experience can operate things well if they loosen their control slightly.

Building *Swale*, there has been so much work getting it to where it is, but I am looking forward to this point where maybe it will trade hands, which I hope it will. Perhaps only then will I be able to truly enjoy it. Maybe it could even become a part of the Parks Department in the city. It's a long shot, but as far as public engagement, that organization could maintain a certain level of momentum. It's a pie in the sky idea, but

sometimes you just have to hope for the best case scenario. There is a different type of manic enjoyment right now in the delicate balance of it all. There is a certain tenseness whenever I am not right there with the project.

**PC:** Why do you think that so many of your large scale projects have manifested into these floating sculptures?

**MM:** I am drawn to working in common and shared spaces in general, but there is this special quality with water environments which allows you to do things that aren't feasible on land. You can have a certain level of mobility with a potentially huge object that could not function in that way on land. I think it speaks to my history of wanting to see this place [the waterfront] as both openly accessible to the public and also healthy biologically. The water was quite polluted where I grew up so we did not have access to that sort of space. The more I read and learn about water conditions around the world, the more I understand that this is a widespread problem which is getting worse. Again there is an urgency there. It seems like there is not much hope at times. What can we do in the time remaining? I still see the water as a place where you can exercise a certain hopefulness in your actions.

**PC:** I see hope in the urgency you mention. I don't see this urgency as problematic, but rather as a powerful motivator. Perhaps your large floating projects fulfill an environmental remediation role that reflects this sense of necessity?

**MM:** Locally, yes. I think it's sometimes difficult for me to understand certain levels of spatial and social interaction; so creating something like an ecosystem on a smaller more human scale makes it more accessible to our limited perceptual capabilities. I think it both connects to a more global scale and feels completely daunting as well. So for me it still feels like a very local level of remediation.

**PC:** Speaking effectively at a local level makes it easier for the core message to spread out to other communities. In this way, working locally does not seem like a shortcoming

by any means, but rather a strength. You have also stated, “I’m working towards making contained living systems and ecosystems with *holes* that leave room for necessary sharing within the experiment while I try to understand how humans will survive in the future, so perhaps this is a bridge between the present conditions and the future.” You imply that the ‘holes’ in your contained living systems can help connect the past and future by encouraging cooperation. Do you think we might witness a paradigm shift wherein humanity could see itself as an equal participant cooperating with the rest of the biosphere?

**MM:** I certainly hope so. I think that this pending shift in thinking is one way we can become more resilient, or even more than that. We can regenerate livable spaces and ecosystems that have vanished over time. We can make sure that knowledge about these spaces is more widespread and appreciated too. We need to account for each other to make these places relevant in this present time. I think about the supermarket as being a space that is unsustainable and predict a relatively short lifespan into the future. When more people understood the satisfaction that comes from connecting with the origins of their food, gardening and urban foraging will become more popular. That is what the floating works like *Swale*, *Waterpod*, and *WetLand* are engaged with; a return to an intimate engagement with food. It is special to have something that connects cities with a sort of ecological productivity that is not normally considered to be urban.

**PC:** What are some of the plants that you consider to be more surprising when people realize their utility?

**MM:** There are so many plants fitting that description in these projects! One in particular is Hyssop; it has these minty leaves which are good for your blood and liver along with other medicinal qualities. Some of these plants are quite common. It is really profound when you consider how something so prolific can be healthful and accessible. Dandelions for example, have leaves which are perfect for salads and nutritionally dense. It has been inspiring to consider the urban environment as an edible landscape when that idea seems so counterintuitive. This is even more motivating than thinking about the gardening

aspect for me, despite many of my projects having involved gardening components. The ability to forage for widely available, healthy and nutritious fare is a very liberating sensation that transforms your idea about what food can be. To go back to the idea of “holes”, you can begin to identify where these knowledge gaps are in order to fill them. This provides strong motivation for me. I was speaking with a friend recently about why we spend our lives making things, and we came down to two central feelings: anger and love. Those feelings are so intertwined. Sometimes we get angry about the things we love, or maybe we come to love the things that used to make us angry; which can provide another powerful motivation. Hopefully something productive can come from that drive to continue.

**PC:** In keeping with this idea of emotional motivation in mind, let’s consider your bundled sculptures. You often mention your bundled object projects as *Sisyphaean*; with the accumulated objects acting like boulders threatening to overtake us. While the influences of overwhelming materialism are certainly evident, there is also a certain hopefulness in these actions that is absent in the ancient Greek myth. At the end of the day, rather than rolling back down the hill, you have accomplished symbolic feats of triumph over the objects that once controlled your life. How do you consider the idea of hope within your work?

**MM:** Hope is the only thing we really have, considering the bleakness of future predictions. It’s easy to give up on but also difficult to continue without it. Concerning human actions, I consider hope as an emotion that can keep us blinded, which is not always a good thing. Sometimes this leads to us uncritically searching for cures to the symptoms of environmental degradation rather than solving the deeper root problems.

I see the straps, ropes, and suspension systems that bind the object sculptures together as being essential to making the conceptual density and weight of objects physically tangible. Physically tying everything together in bundles is a good way for me to understand that weight more deeply. It also has to do with a sort of memorialization of the things which seem to deserve it in some way. Many of the objects have an important past which is transformed when they are obscured in these amalgamations of other things.



**PC:** When one considers the title *House and Universe* it is interesting how it speaks about the cosmic relationship with the ways people accumulate constellations of objects that they have collected over the years. Some of us collect veritable galaxies. Do you think that as these constellations grow, some of the original integrity or identity of the person at their center is lost? Or to put it differently, is there a point when we cease to control these objects, surrendering our perceived power and dominance over to *them*?

**MM:** I think it is completely false that these collections define who we are. However, the way these stockpiles are manifested differently from person to person may contribute to a renewed meaning for the objects themselves. I do not agree with the philosophy that your belongings define you or that you can reconstruct someone else's identity from what they own. It becomes tricky when we recognize the mutual influence these things have on us; a complex web of interfacing and exchange. There is a personally defined inclination toward what you decide to collect more or learn more about, but I don't think this necessarily *defines* who you are. I consider the objects to have more weight than the person collecting in that they are coming from a multitude of different places; as they build up they can obscure and confuse the identity of the collector. Despite this sort of blurring of the collector's uniqueness, I still do not think that they add up to create a summary of the person.

**PC:** You personally have expressed feelings both of sadness when bundling your objects away inside these sculptural bundles and a sense of liberation from the oppression they sometimes create. Would you elaborate on these ideas?

**MM:** Some of the things that are significant to me create some feelings of pain when I bundle them away, because I know that I cannot access them in ways that are familiar. It is especially difficult with things that have been given to me by someone important in my life. I often wonder about how these objects fit into the supply chain and waste streams, and how they are subsequently being rendered useless by being accumulated into these

bundles. Of course in other ways it is also very empowering to free yourself of things you once believed to depend on, so that is what I think I mean by “liberating”.

**PC:** Are you working with that rejuvenated history as a conceptual framework for your projects? For instance, with *Swale*, being based on a repurposed barge, do you find yourself engaging with the idea of a barge conceptually?

**MM:** The forms are more difficult to change when you work with things that have a history and a past life of being used for something completely different. It can be a struggle but it is also rewarding... I think of [*Swale*'s] history as a construction barge and its industrial past of being produced and then contributing to the supply chain in the context of transporting materials and goods. I wondered how things that are so deeply connected to the industry of material consumption be a part of this highly accessible floating food forest that we are making? I like to think about how you can take an object and put it to a use that contradicts the original purpose for its existence. Much of the irrigation system on *Swale* is comprised of reused military water bladders. This was a conscious decision to take something with a painful and violent history in war and making it more productive and useful to a new group of people. Things are often given a new life in art.

**PC:** With regards to consumption you have said “Above all, I am asking a question about what the future could be. How are the rituals around production, consumption, and the ideas of ownership different?” I know it’s a big question, but have you arrived at any ideas through the process of your work regarding how these rituals could be different?

**MM:** I am always trying to navigate how the rituals of ownership could be different and asking questions about why we really need to proclaim our ownership over anything. I don’t just mean in terms of legal ownership on paper. I was recently discussing with a friend about ownership being expanded into the virtual realm through image capture technology. Here you can essentially “own” something by obtaining a certain amount of information about it or being able to observe in a specific way. This includes certain

military technologies (such as satellite and drone based surveillance) which enable control through observation. However, I am more interested in basic consumer paths to ownership in Western culture, such as buying something in a store, property deeds and other things. How radically different would life be without that? What can we consider to be the commons in the future? There was a time when we did not have defined basis of widespread ownership. So now, what needs to be owned and what can be more democratically distributed becomes a very interesting conversation.

**PC:** This has been amazing Mary, I just have one final question. You have said, “Good artists have the ability to see the world from a vantage point of the macro. This is the most invaluable experience.” In what way do you consider the macro, or the micro for that matter, in your work? For example, your online project OWN-it.com is an inventory of many of your belongings. It seems to be dedicated both to micro examinations of personally significant objects in your life, but also to viewing their macro implications within the commodity chain and global web of resources.

**MM:** It’s always been so important for me to step outside the safe zone, perhaps even being as literal as moving to a new place. With the *Waterpod* project, when I was living on a barge for six months, almost never leaving, my thought process became quite myopic regarding everyday concerns. Being able to jump from a small space to think more globally is one of the most important things anyone can do or try to do. It allows you to realize what happens in peripheral spaces, which can be invaluable. That is what I meant by considering both micro and macro scales. This is also something I am working towards with *Swale*. Getting outside your own space is essential. I think that artists’ ability to work on larger projects or construct something entirely new is something particularly valuable. It’s what we are trained to do. This unique perspective allows us to experience a diverse range of viewpoints. Maybe that is part of the difference between industrial thinking and artistic thinking.

## Practice Documentation



*Sprouted Work Shorts.* 2015. Living plants (mixed microgreen sprouts), soilless growth medium, plant light, khaki work shorts. Variable dimensions (approximately 16" across).

These work shorts have been through a lot of hard times. Now they serve as a container for growing nutritious sprouts to keep their former owner healthy, to continue working.



***Filing Cabinet Worm Farm.*** 2015. Composting worms (red wigglers), paper shredder, environmental management documents, filing cabinet, LED lights, water, aquarium air pump and stone. 18" x 40" x 60"

This filing cabinet has been converted into a multi-tiered worm farm, intended specifically for composting defunct environmental management policy documents, such as the underutilized *Green Belt Act* (2005). The documents are stored in the top drawer before being shredded in the second. They are fed to composting red wiggler worms who turn the paper into fertile worm castings. In the final drawer, the worm castings are percolated in water with an air stone to create 'worm tea,' a liquid fertilizer which can be used in organic forms of hydroponics.



*Pendulum*. 2015. Climbing pea plant, glass carboy, hydroponics system, steel cable, wood. Approximately 3' x 3' x 25', swinging arc of 13'

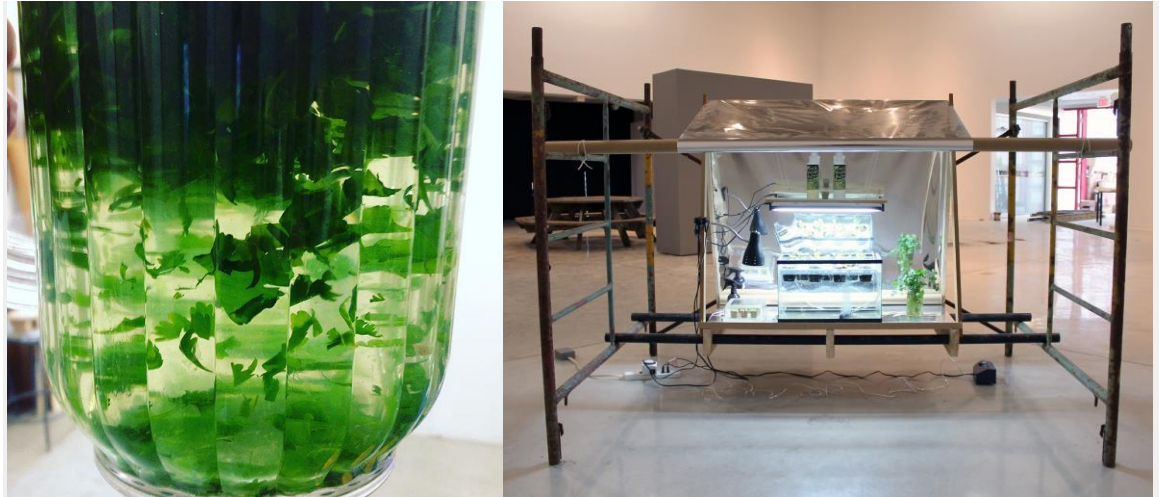
A living pendulum swings through gently curving arcs, suspended from the gallery ceiling more than twenty feet above. The frail pea plant slowly climbing the carboy's harness is supported by the nutrient solution which fills the glass vessel. Constantly swinging patterns recall timekeeping, celestial motion, and the menacing threat of wrecking equipment. The fragile and contained characteristics of this system also acknowledge the equally intimidating and delicate balance found in biotic environments.





**Window.** 2015. 13-year-old Red Maple bonsai, wood stool and desk, desk lamp, computer monitor. Approximately 28" x 48" x 60"

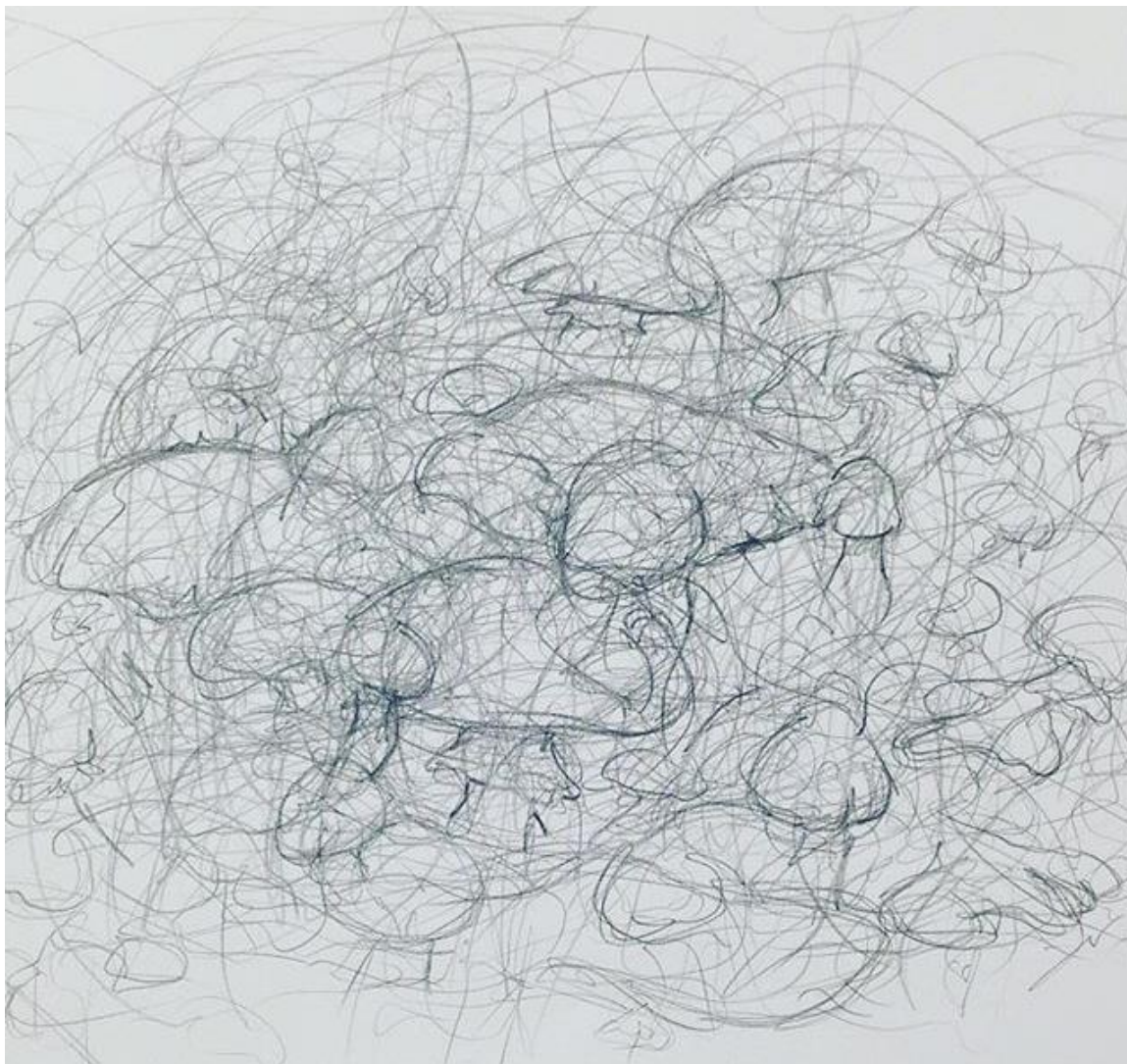
A bonsai observes as a live streaming feed of Algonquin park plays on the computer monitor in front of it. A workstation or a teleconference? Yearning for wilderness or an attempt to learn? A plant's agency or an artists misguided efforts to pacify their charge?



***Hydroponic Cilantro Installation.*** 2016. Cilantro, hydroponic system, scaffolding, wood, reflective mylar sheeting, polystyrene. 6' x 6' x 5'6"

This installation was built for the MFA group exhibition in winter 2016. I made an overconstructed unit wherein cilantro plants could be grown for consumption in a participatory taco building event during the exhibition. The remaining cilantro was served in a jalapeno limeade during Western's Open Studios event, 2016.





***Video Drawings of Growth.*** 2016. Mixed media on paper. Variable dimensions.

The image above is a drawing performed over the course of the entire documentary *Know Your Mushrooms* (2008), by Rob Mann. While the video plays, projected on the wall, I attempt to trace the mushrooms. Sometimes they appear in a flash, or move across the screen and the drawing becomes a swirling blur. At other times, the image stays for long enough to permit a more sustained gestural drawing. This method has been repeated many times with time lapse videos of plant growth as well as with mushrooms.



*Percolator*. 2016. Coffee Arabica plants, steel dumpster, hydroponic system, casters, wood, lexan, two-way mirror, chain. Approximately 6' x 6'6" x 12'

An upended dumpster, its expected contents conspicuously missing. Replacing the typical detritus of everyday life is a hydroponics system purpose built to grow coffee arabica plants. The weather and repurposed dumpster is not only a means of growing and incubation, but as an exercise in absurdity acknowledging the enormous amounts of energy and waste associated with the coffee industry. The plants themselves are protected

from the outside but also alienated by this "sanctuary". Arabica plants were chosen for their culturally generated relationship to global trade networks and waste economies. Beans from mature plants travel thousands of miles from their tropical places of origin, going through many processing stages leading to a one-time brewing followed by disposal. This use of the beans denies their biological purposes as the progeny of coffee trees. The hydroponic system supports the plants through intermittent watering with a nutrient solution partially derived from percolated "worm tea". The worm castings come from a composter which processes used coffee grounds after brewing. Using the coffee waste as a means of fertilizing the next generation of plants creates an absurd closed loop system driven by the overwhelming societal drive to consume this resource.





***DisReGarden.*** 2016. Coffee Arabica plants, rolling polyurethane recycling bin, hydroponic system, wood, chain. Approximately 4' x 4' x 5'. Dimensions change with lamp positions.

This semi-mobile version of the percolator project is intended as a next step for the project once the coffee seedlings mature beyond the needs of their incubator. They can be moved into this unit which has been converted from a rolling recycling bin. The smaller, still delicate plants can be held in the grow tower located inside the bin before transitioning to the pods on the outside of the bin. The whole unit is supported by an integrated drip hydroponic system.



*Greenhouse Drawing #1.* 2016. Graphite on Stonehenge paper. 15" x 22"

My first sustained attempt during MFA to return drawing to my artistic practice. These drawings were intended as research into my interest in the industrial hydroponic greenhouses in Leamington, Ontario. Due to the limitations of working in only graphite, I decided to return to the subject with different materials later, in search of a livelier atmospheric effect.



*Greenhouse Drawing #2.* 2016. Graphite on Stonehenge paper. 22" x 30"





*Scythe (Negotiating Equilibrium? Balances and Counterbalances)*. 2017. Scarlet runner beans, farmer's scythe, lighting stand balancing point, hydroponic system, water jerry can, hemp string. Approximately 2' x 5' x 6'

This sculpture is a more minimal version of some of my more involved hydroponic sculptures. Here the scythe acts not as a container, but rather as a growth support. Additionally, the scythe is balanced on an elevated fulcrum, directly acknowledging the balancing act of agriculture. This delicate balancing act is made all the more absurd by the inclusion of an awkward hydroponic apparatus which sustains the beans while highlighting their status in a consumption based food economy. Scarlet runner beans were chosen for their relationship to harvesting and their climbing qualities.



*Leamington Greenhouse Drawings*. 2017. Pencil crayon and watercolour on mylar, negative viewing light box, table legs. Table measures 18" x 48" x 40".

The drawings use mylar which has been pre-treated with watercolours. These stains break up the surface and introduce a liquid medium that beads into organic puddles and droplets the surface of the plastic before drying. The pencil crayon is then used to trace the hydroponic systems found within the Leamington greenhouses. The drawings are then backlit on a photographic negative light box which has been flipped and converted into a table.



*Abandoned Haldimand County Drawings*. 2017. Watercolour on paper. Shelves of lexan and wood. Dimensions range from 6" x 9" to 9" x 12"

In my home area of Haldimand county, there are many abandoned greenhouses. These are indicative of the struggling local economy and some repeated incidents involving marijuana growing operations. The rigid frames of the greenhouses are juxtaposed against the broken glass windows, torn and flapping plastic sheeting, and the plants that now grow on site, in the absence of human gardeners.





***Grow Tower (Heirlooms?)***. 2017. Corn, beans, and squash (all heirloom varieties), found communications tower, hydroponic system, string, wood. Approximately 4' x 4' x 18'6"

A rusted tower leaning in the gallery space, the hydroponic system grafted into it hums and drips constantly. This system supports three separate pods of plants; corn, beans and squash which comprise the traditional 'Three Sisters' planting arrangement pioneered by many Indigenous societies in North America. Instead of honouring the traditional planting style in which the plants share each other's strengths to form a stronger collective whole, the plants are absurdly grown in separate pods, neglecting their symbiotic potency, but the human made system continues to function without further modification. Regardless of their separate containment, the plants all seek out light and space beyond, as they graft onto and wind their way along the structure of their support system.



***Grown Text.*** Microgreens grown in soilless media. Variable dimensions.

This text is grown for my thesis exhibit in two instances. One is for the exhibition text. These sprouts have been grown beforehand, harvested, then dried for presentation on the wall. The second group is grown on the floor over the course of the exhibition, harvested just before the closing reception and served to the guests.



*Tent Trailer Tree Theatre (Can't See the Forest for the Trees)*. 2017. Mixed spruce trees, found soft top tent trailer, hydroponic system, wood. 12' x 13' x 8'6"

We share a complicated societal relationship with forests in Canada. They have been used for recreation, building materials, food, fuel, and material for our cultural productions. They have been privatized, made public, sold, and resold. One thing that is not often considered is the specific agency of the collective entities of forests. They possess an undeniable power to affect the human community, even if one only considers their photosynthetic ability to convert carbon dioxide to cellulose and oxygen. Trees individually have arguably little impact on the overall biological systems they are a part of; not unlike individual humans. However, when considered as a whole, both trees and humans become forces to be reckoned with.

This mobile tree farm is built from an old soft top tent trailer as a direct conceptual link to outdoor recreation and consumption of "wilderness". The trees occupy the central body of the trailer as well as the rear bump-out section. As these trees grow, they are confronted with projections of forests which have come before them. A collaged video plays in the side bump-out sections of the trailer, composed of a blend of footage including clearcuts, planting efforts, old growth forests, and agroforestry. This videos may be viewed from inside the trailer alongside the seedlings, or in the kitchen shelter attachment which is converted into a theatre for the human audience. The video's audio component is dominated by faint field recordings of forests, interspersed by both harvesting equipment and the endless work of tree planting crews. These projections are complemented by faint sounds of the hum of the internal irrigation and lighting system. The trailer thus becomes a method of exposing the young trees to their complicated history shared with humans; at once nurturing and destructive, parasitic and constructive.

At the closing of the exhibition, once the seedlings have been exposed to their history and the humans with whom they will be sharing the urban environment, the trees will be ready to be planted locally and the trailer will be ready to host a new generation of trees, and people.

## Bibliography of Supplemental Reading

Below is a list of readings which influenced my thesis work, but which were not directly cited in the writing.

George F. Van Patten. *Gardening Indoors with Soil and Hydroponics*. Van Patten Press Publishing, 2007.

George Gessert. *Green Light: Toward an Art of Evolution*. The MIT Press. 2010.

Jeffrey Kastner, Land and *Environmental Art*. London UK, Phaidon Press, 1998.

Keith Roberto. *How To Hydroponics (Fourth Edition)*. Farmingdale NY, Futuregarden, 2003.

John K. Grande, *Balance: Art and Nature*. Montreal, Black Rose Books, 2004.



## Curriculum Vitae

### Education

- 2015-2017 Master of Fine Art (in progress), Western University (1151 Richmond Street London, Ontario, Canada, N6A 3K7).
- 2009-2013 Bachelor of Arts Honours, Guelph University (50 Stone Road East Guelph Ontario. N1G 2W1 (519) 824-4210)

### Solo Exhibitions/Projects

- 2017 Upcoming Solo Show. Y+ Contemporary Projects, Scarborough, Ontario.
- 2017 Gardening at Arm's Length. Graduate Thesis Exhibition. ArtLab Gallery, University of Western Ontario.
- 2014 Kokedama: A Fractured Garden. Niagara Artist Centre, Flea Market Gallery. 46 Turner Crescent, St Catharines, Ontario.
- 2013 Deep Cleanse. Solo Show. Roadside Attractions 911 Davenport Road, Toronto, Ontario.
- 2012 Mycelial. Solo Show. Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, Ontario.
- 2012 Remembrance. Solo Show. Framing and Art Center. 188 Kent Street. London, Ontario.

### Group Exhibitions/Projects

- 2016 I Know What You Did Last Summer. Group Show. ArtLab Gallery, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario.
- 2016 Fresh Paint and New Constructions. Group Show. Art Mur, Montreal, Quebec.
- 2016 Mushroom Festival. Group Show. The Bookshelf Museum, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario.
- 2016 Closed System: Sustainable Growth. Group Show. Artlab Gallery, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario.
- 2015 The Politics of Design. Group Show. Xpace Cultural Centre. Toronto, Ontario.
- 2015 Escape Plans. Group Show. Younger Than Beyonce Gallery. Toronto, Ontario.
- 2015 Grow Op. Group Show. The Gladstone Hotel. Toronto, Ontario.
- 2014 Untitled. Two Person Show. Pszczonak Contemporary Window Gallery. University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.
- 2013 Something Like A Paintopticon. g a l e r i e s a i n t - j a q u e s, Guelph, Ontario.
- 2013 Object Abuse - Group Show. Spinach Gallery, London, UK.
- 2013 What Have Yous. Group Show. Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, Ontario.
- 2013 Stranger Stranger. Group Show. Boarding House Gallery 6 Dublin St. S., Guelph, Ontario.
- 2012 How We Got Lost. Group Show. Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, Ontario.
- 2011 Extreme Drawing. Group Show. Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, Ontario.
- 2011 Threespective. Three Person Show. Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, Ontario.

### Public Projects

- 2017-18 Upcoming Standalone Sculptural installation in the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health expansion, Toronto, Ontario.
- 2017 Echo Arts Festival. University of Western Ontario Campus. London, Ontario.
- 2016 *Percolator* Solo Project at CAFKA '16 (Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener and Area Biennial). Kitchener, Ontario.
- 2015 Niagara Falls Night of Art. Niagara Falls History Museum. Niagara Falls, Ontario.

2013 Fluxus Garden. Solo Project. St. George's Square, Guelph, Ontario. Public Artwork commissioned by Musagetes.

### **Awards**

2016-2017 Ontario Graduate Scholarship, University of Western Ontario.

2015-2016 SSHRC - CGS Masters Research Scholarship, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario.

2015-2016 Ontario Graduate Scholarship, University of Western Ontario. \*declined\*

2015 Dean's Entrance Scholarship, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario.

2015 Chair's Entrance Scholarship, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario.

2013 Dean's Honour Roll, University of Guelph.

2011 Tony Arrell Scholarship, University of Guelph.

### **Publications**

2016 Exhibition Catalogue, *Fresh Paint - New Construction - 12th edition* Catalogue, Art Mur Gallery, Montreal Quebec. Print.

2014 Interview on Musagetes' weekly radio show "The Secret Ingredient" (Episode broadcast @ 9:00 am on Wednesday September 17, 2014) on 93.3fm CFRU campus radio at the University of Guelph. <http://www.cfru.ca/recordings/158>

2013 'Planting Seeds of Possibilities in St. George's Square'. Project Review by Jessica Lovell. 'Guelph Tribune'. September 12, 2013.

<http://www.guelphtribune.ca/community/planting-seeds-of-possibilities-in-st-georges-square/>

2012 'From A to Zavitz' Solo Show Exhibit Review by Nadine Maher. 'The Ontarian'. November 15, 2012. <http://www.theontarian.com/2012/11/from-a-to-zavitz-8/>

'Drawing With Paper' Exhibit Review by Tom Beedham. 'The Ontarian'. November 17, 2011.

2011 'Triple Perspective' Exhibit Review by Divinus Caesar. 'The Ontarian'. November 3, 2011. <http://www.theontarian.com/2011/11/triple-perspective/>

2011 'Mushrooms Remind Us to Look Around' by Abid Virani. 'Guelph Mercury'. March 29, 2011.

<http://www.guelphmercury.com/news-story/2766227-mushrooms-remind-us-to-look-around/>

### **Workshops and Teaching Experience**

2017 Artist Talk/Workshop. Y+ Contemporary, Toronto, Ontario.

2017 Workshop in association with Subtle Technologies. "Hydroponics for Artists". Inter/Access, Toronto, Ontario.

2017 Artist Talk. "Gardening at Arm's Length". Grimsby Public Art Gallery, St. Catherine's, Ontario.

2017 Conference Presentation at Envirocon. "Grasping for Utopias". University of Western Ontario.

2016 Interdisciplinary Plastic Pollution Think Tank at DNA Artspace, London, Ontario.

2016 Artist Roundtable at CAFKA Symposium, Critical Media Lab in Kitchener, Ontario.

2016 Artist Talk at Bealart Program. H.B. Beal Secondary School, London, Ontario.

2016 Conference Presentation at Envirocon. "Problematic Ethics of Earth and Land Art. University of Western Ontario.

2016 Portraiture Workshop. Glenhyrst Gallery, Brantford, Ontario.

2015 Graduate Teaching Assistant - Sculpture and Installation. University of Western Ontario (September 2015 - April 2016).

2015 Current Member on Board of Directors for Haldimand Artworks. Haldimand County, Ontario.

2014 Artist Talk @ Orangeville Upper Credit Field Naturalist Club, focusing on mushrooms and ecology in contemporary art.

2014 Guest Juror for River Arts Festival in Dunnville, Ontario.

2014 Library Living workshops. Three projects focusing on group work and abstraction taught to adults with special needs on two separate events.

2014 Combining Two Cultures (C2C) Conference on interdisciplinary studies at the University of Guelph. Lecture on the combination of art and science in mushroom related artworks.

2013 Guelph Café Art Lecture Series. Workshop Leader, "How Do We Build Communities with Art?".

2013 Weekly Radio Show with Musagetes (International Art Organization based in Guelph) on 93.3fm CFRU campus radio at the University of Guelph. Interviewing artists and presenting discussion on issues in contemporary art.

2008-2009 Teaching classes portraiture, (for six separate 2 hour sessions) as part of the "Museum School" Program. Medical Hall of Fame, London, Ontario.