With Silk, Sage, and Bones: Confronting Death and Dying Through Nature and Ritualistic Healing

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WITH SILK, SAGE, AND BONES: CONFRONTING DEATH AND DYING THROUGH NATURE AND RITUALISTIC HEALING

By

BRITTNEY FUCHECK
B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the School of Visual Arts and Design in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines my fears of death and dying. Through my studio art practice, which includes observational representation, ceremonial and ritualistic performance, and installation, I seek to confront my own difficulty in accepting death’s emotional weight. My motivation stems from my attachment to my mother’s mortality and her relationship with dying animals. In researching cultural customs relating to death, I was inspired to explore non-archival materials and ritualistic processes reflecting my understanding of our bodies' temporal nature. This includes swaddling, etching, using materials such as branches, animal bones, copper, shells, and pine needles, and encasing materials in wax. My points of interest are occurrences of death and decay. These interactions help me find acceptance and comfort during moments of uncertainty.

Scale variations in my work are intentional and directly correlate my emotional response to my experiences with nature. From small, intimate works to larger, monumental ones, I explore the authority that size achieves when exaggerated and paired with images. These gestures of curiosity and compassion aim to emphasize my innate care and the ability to restore dignity surrounding the experience of loss and dying. Centered around the ubiquity of grieving and healing, my creative process and work products express the crucial value of accepting my own impermanence through emotional vulnerability. Creating this body of work helped me realize and appreciate alternative understandings and associations with death; and by exhibiting the work, I am inviting the viewer into my life and practice with the hope it creates a brief opportunity for them to reflect and reconsider their relationship with death.
For Mamita, Michael, and Bryant
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Thank you to my parents, brother, and family of all ties for their complete faith in my work and person. I could never return the love I’ve been given within this lifetime. I do this all for you.

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INTRODUCTION

I am familiar with the common pains that come from death. I suffered the loss of family members, pets, and the unfortunate proxy that comes through loved ones who had similar circumstances. My relationship with death became unique when it overstepped my false expectations of when and how it would affect me. I did not expect to lose a friend to cancer so early in my teens. Or to know the diagnosis of my grandfather a few months before he passed, knowing the last Christmas we had together was indeed the very last. He died two months after we saw him for the holidays, the day after my birthday. A few years later, my childhood cat died on Christmas Eve. The most accosting experience of all was when my mother was diagnosed with cancer and overcame it. She was not taken away from me, but she could have been. I was so stressed about her well-being that I experienced moments of absolute panic.

Despite this, I now strive to have gratitude for death. I want to recognize it as an inevitable and natural event every living thing experiences. However, death often arrives without warning and, for the most part, uninvited. As much as I intellectualize death and try to recognize its scientific truth, I'm scared of the suffering that comes with it. I dread thinking about what happens to my sense of self after loved ones are gone, or worse if my loneliness overtakes me as time progresses. I have experienced loving someone so much that I am paralyzed with fear over the idea of losing them. My biggest challenge is how I cope with my losses, and how I celebrate the people in my life, even after they are gone. The actions taken in my journey as both an artist and person are the beginnings of confronting death so that I can enjoy the people that are presently in my life.
EARLIER WORK

My apprehensions of possibly losing my mother left me scared and expecting loss at all times. I found myself with trepidations that were becoming barriers in my life because of early experiences with loss through death. However, my familiarity with death always left me with a lingering fascination for how it worked. I knew very little besides the fact that it was emotionally painful. Because of this, I sought out the science behind death and explored the mechanics of decay. In exploring the scientific and detached aspects of death through decay, I stepped closer to uncovering my thoughts on why death frightened me.

Before considering a fine arts path for my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, I toggled between digital and traditional ways of utilizing watercolor and gouache. In the triptych Study of a Deer (Figure 1), my curiosity allowed me to branch away from how a medium could accurately depict something to how mark-making and materials have the capability of uncovering a deeper meaning of a subject. In this work, I manipulated elements of fauna and flora to explore color to represent and exaggerate my interest in the breaking down of organic matter.
The deer, the subject of the triptych, was hit and left by a roadside. After two weeks of seeing its corpse rot away, I realized it had either been forgotten or overlooked by sanitation and I grieved for the disregard. Its moldering appearance influenced my decisions regarding composition, color, and mark-making (Figure 2). The bones, fur, and leaves are rendered crudely, obscuring the clarity of what and where the subject is in the image. I could not understand which side of the deer I had been looking at and wanted to imitate this through broad strokes and solid color. The use of quick marks applied in layers constructed a sense of profound disturbance. What I thought might have been a leg could have also been a piece of the neck or a chunk of the animal’s back. The confusion I felt while looking at this carcass influenced my handling of the paint by combining areas of the background with the subject, making it unclear where parts of the deer end against the ground. I showcased the festering environment harbored underneath by engulfing the bones and skin of the deer with puckered marks. Inspired by nighttime forensic photographs, the harsh light source was appropriated and exaggerated within the paintings to insinuate themes of crime, violence, and investigation (Figure 3). Decay became a way for me to segue into reflecting on my feelings about death with a scientific and clinical view. Because of decay’s role in the life cycle, I could be emotionally removed from it while
viewing it as essential for life to begin and end. This is in stark contrast to my anxieties regarding grief. Becoming familiar with decay as a scientifically known aspect of death helped me acclimate to the emotional uncertainty of death.

Figure 2: Britney Fucheck. 2018. *Painting 2 of Study of a Deer*. Watercolor and gouache on paper. 12x12 in.

Figure 3: Britney Fucheck. 2018. *Painting 3 of Study of a Deer*. Watercolor and gouache on paper. 12x12 in.

I was very squeamish when approaching the deer at first and could only muster a few minutes with the remains before taking my photos and leaving. Vultures had violently tossed the body around, torn open skin, and left the animal’s limbs in unnatural positions. What really repulsed me was the smell. It was not like anything I had encountered before. It was horrendous and once I understood what it is like, I could never forget it. This physical hesitation provoked thoughts about my emotional hesitation surrounding death. With the paintings at 12x12 inches, I was required to be physically close to the surface of the paintings. It allowed me to spend more time inspecting the animal without being near it. This closeness was also a way to bring my
viewers closer to death. In painting the decaying state of the animal, they may reflect on their own hesitations without encountering the smells and visceral sights that would otherwise repel them.

I reflected on why I chose the deer as a subject. My curiosity and sadness for the animal came from my relationship with my mother and her relationship with wildlife. Besides picking up the occasional stray cat, my mother also comes across animals that are recently hit by cars and are still alive. She picks them up and takes them to the side of the road, staying with them until they pass. What upsets her the most is knowing people have the capability of hurting another living being. In consciously seeking animals on the road, she has developed a death doula practice in which she accompanies and tends to animals who are in need of assistance and comfort. I relate to those animals.

In *Inseparable* (Figure 4), I chose the pelt of the axis deer to highlight my fears of suddenly losing my mother. The spots that are commonly seen in other species of fawns fade away as they grow into adulthood. However, the axis deer carries its spots throughout its lifetime. Much like these spots, my attachment to my mother has not left, nor has it gotten smaller. I did not understand that emotional growth and attachment were nonlinear until this moment. This painting was a way for me to figuratively cauterize myself by highlighting a subject I had long feared: if my mother’s life ends, I might end mine. At the time, I had grown increasingly anxious about my mother’s well-being after her recovery from cancer. As more time was spent away from home, away from my mother, the more I missed her and feared that something would happen. Anxieties of her falling victim to a car crash or for her to have a cancer recurrence perturbed me. Not knowing attachment could be in flux, I felt that something was wrong at this moment in my adulthood. Even though my mother immigrated to the USA to seek
independence, raised two children independently, and survived breast cancer, I could not see her triumphs. I could only see the moments where hardships piled up on her. Intrusive thoughts exaggerated the idea of losing her in other traumatic ways. I felt a loss of control. The mental paralysis of the “what-if” game pushed me into emotional turmoil, distancing me from the reality of my mother’s victories and robbing me of my sense of peace. This realization convinced me to ground myself and ask: am I losing the present by pre-mourning the future?

Using scale and symbolic visuals put these thoughts into perspective and allowed me to better understand myself. This was the biggest painting I had made at the time. The figures are larger than life, communicating a sense of importance. It will be some time before I make large-scale work again. However, the forthcoming works will explore the effectiveness of scale, both small and large. After Inseparable, I found other symbols from nature and used it within my work to see where I was with my relationship to death, decay, and grief.
Figure 4: Brittney Fucheck. 2018. *Inseparable*. watercolor, acrylic, and ink on canvas. 5x7 ft.
MUSHROOMS AS LIMINAL SPACE

What do you do when your world starts to fall apart? I go for a walk, and if I’m really lucky, I find mushrooms. Mushrooms pull me back into my senses, not just—like flowers—through their riotous colors and smells but because they pop up unexpectedly, reminding me of the good fortune of just happening to be there. Then I know that there are still pleasures amidst the terrors of indeterminacy.¹

Right before I entered the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Central Florida, the COVID pandemic hit. There was an uptick in feeling a sense of agency from the lockdown period and many people found sanctuary outside. Already in the habit of taking walks, I made it a routine to venture out further into the wilderness, beyond accessible trails, to better understand why I felt so at home in nature. I occasionally encountered mushrooms of varying sizes, colors, and shapes on excursions. Finding the same kind of mushroom when revisiting a location is a challenge. Many mushrooms only pop up once or twice in the same spot. Their lifespans can range from a few hours to a few days, which makes them exceptionally ephemeral. Spotting the same kind again was something to which I looked forward. Having had COVID 19, the anxieties of illness and death post-infection pushed me to reconsider what I previously took for granted. The most urgent realization was the lack of time I spent with loved ones and the opportunities I turned down to be physically close to them. Making a game out of finding mushrooms was a way for me to make time to reflect on these missed opportunities while still being isolated from potential illness.

Mushrooms exist in the phase between life and death. Their role in the environment is to

break down organic matter, altering the soil chemistry so that new life can grow once again.\textsuperscript{2} Fungi are a chance for rebirth, a liminal space of passing and renewal. I fell in love with these little fruiting bodies and felt it necessary to introduce them into my studio practice. Continuing to use gouache with the addition of acrylic paint, I rendered miniature yet indomitable portraits of each mushroom I came across. More than a montage of fungi, I made fifteen mushroom portraits in the series \textit{Moments} (Figure 5) to capture moments of joy. While studying mushrooms, I referred to my initial studies of decay. Having a visual cue for death and decay gave me the sense that there was a possibility to confront the fear of dying. Their benign appearance made them approachable, and I began seeing them through child-like lenses. I was compelled to consider the period before a child understands the concept of death and this fueled my approach for the series. I wanted to reclaim what it felt like to be excited for every second ahead of me without the dread of knowing I may not have another day.

Figure 5: Brittney Fucheck. 2020. 9 paintings from Moments series. Gouache and acrylic on wood panel. (each 4x4 in.)
The soil, leaves, and sticks surrounding the central mushroom were considered within the details surrounding the mushroom. Between layers of locally colored paint, I left small pockets of saturated hues from the underpainting. This was done to encourage the viewer to seek the small details surrounding the central subject, allowing them to slow down and appreciate the painting in its entirety. As I made more of these portraits, I played with scale and forced perspective further down onto the ground. The low point of view mimicked how I positioned my head against the soil to identify the underside of the mushroom. Every fruiting body found was a reminder to enjoy the little things we overlook when stuck in a fast-paced routine.

After completing the paintings, I realized my artistic objective was evolving because I found myself comfortable for the wrong reasons. I was not confronting the difficulties of death anymore, in fact, I was hiding from it. Instead of embracing the end of life that is necessary for decay to occur, I focused on the aftermath of decay through the growth of fungi. Without realizing it, this body of work was centered around the safety of life instead of confronting the inevitability of death. Although informative and fun, approaching death by prioritizing living mushrooms felt a bit superficial. Of course, I am grateful for this experience. It allowed me to learn from my investigation and develop a more intimate dialogue with my fears as I explored my boundaries.

Immediately after this realization, I looked for ways to retain some aspect of mushrooms within my artistic practice. The joy I felt when interacting with them was important for me to retain, to balance the fear of death with the love for life. I needed to build my artwork on the foundations of hope to prevent it from falling into nihilism. As a result, I explored the science of mushrooms and found other formal qualities that were interesting. Spore printing became a part of my practice as a result of exploring mycology. Like a seed, spores are the reproductive unit of
mushrooms. Coming in various colors, they can be used to identify mushroom species. Identification can be made by placing the mushroom, spore releasing side down, against a surface and creating an airtight seal. No airflow ensures the spores fall directly onto the paper without disrupting the impression, creating an image. On average, it can take anywhere from 2 to 24 hours to make a clear print. It is a process that takes time and patience to accomplish, in contrast to the instant gratification of suddenly finding a mushroom. While the activity of spore printing is practical and scientific, I saw it as an artistic one. I wanted to directly use them in my artwork. Unfortunately, preserving them is difficult to accomplish. Accepting their fleeting nature, I quickly began experimenting with different methods of capturing their immediacy. I began to draw, paint, and make prints of these spore prints in an attempt to make them tangible. I limited my palette as a way to formally challenge myself. The only colors used in this series were browns, blacks, greens, beiges, and whites: the same ones found in the natural spore prints I made.

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To parallel the legion of spore prints made after my forays (Figure 6), I produced varied editions through screen printing. I depicted rays of light bursting through the negative spaces of line in some of these prints, while other spores appear to be enveloped in halos and undulating auras of light. Mirroring the idea of transfer from one thing to another, this method of image-making felt appropriate to the emotional impression the mushrooms left on me. Enamored by the explosive quality of the lines in the spore image, I expanded on their pictorial possibilities by adding acrylic, gouache, and watercolor.

I wanted to see how other individuals interpreted their interactions with mushrooms, as I noticed a rising popularity for mushroom foraging on social media and other local online forums. My research led me to *The Mushroom at the End of the World* by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. Her observations come from a niche mushroom trade, in which the Matsutake mushroom facilitates the health of certain trees after the area has been decimated by human intervention, creating a diverse market of mushroom harvesters. Without the downfall of this specific ecosystem, the
livelihood of these harvesters would not exist. I reflected on her reading through my own practice of collecting mushrooms and how my willingness to confront my worries might have been different if it were not for the decay that surrounds the urban environment in which I live.

Tsing talks about precarity, and how it is a condition of vulnerability with one another.

Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. We can’t rely on the status quo; everything is in flux, including our ability to survive. Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. A precarious world is a world without teleology.\(^5\)

Precarity is the state of uncertainty. It is found when we meet new people and say goodbye to old ones. It is in our willingness to change. Without these encounters, either with nature or one another, we cannot move forward.\(^6\)

Coupled with Tsing’s writing, I supplemented my reading with Kingston Trinder’s book, *John Cage A Mycological Foray*. Known primarily for his music composition and as a founder of the Fluxus movement,\(^7\) John Cage found excitement in the possibilities of collaborating with chance. After his exposure to the sporadic nature of mushroom growth, Cage allowed indeterminacy to influence his interest in music, performance, poetry, and artwork. Reading his meditations constructed the foundation for my work with chance in finding mushrooms and animals out on my excursions. Both writings showed me why I was scared in the first place.

When building a life filled with relationships, passions, and memories, I found it easy to forget

\(^5\) Tsing, *Mushroom*, 20
\(^6\) Tsing, *Mushroom*, 20
how quickly they can be taken away from me. Tsing and Cage remind me that there is a lot to
love, and in having so much love, there is a lot to lose.

While seeking and collecting hard, woody mushrooms, I frequently encountered dead
animals on and off the trails I walked. At the time I felt a sense of melancholy, and my
assumption was the animals died alone, in pain, and confused. This assumption was more of a
projection of my emotional state than a logical deduction. My emotional reaction pushed me to
do something about their bodies being left behind, so I began depicting them. It was a chance to
familiarize myself with the animals I found. It was something more tangible that I could handle.
Something closer to death. I slowly felt more and more comfortable around the blood, feces, and
flies that surrounded their bodies. I still did not find the smell pleasant. I do not look forward to
it, even now. However, understanding that animals and people have a shared experience of
living, dying, and decaying helped me feel more comfortable around these things. Without the
necessity of being a subject, the mushroom came back into my practice.

While studying mycology, I learned that certain mushrooms have the unique quality of
preserving marks when pressed into their surface. Woody in texture, their porous underbelly can
be carved with a sharp object to make an image. Once dried, they become as hard as wood,
preventing further alterations to the image. These mushrooms were given the appropriate name
artist conk\textsuperscript{8}, which I saw as a sign to utilize them as a surface for images of animals I found.
Whether half eaten or run over, the animals accompanied every walk I took. My emotional state
compelled me to make imagery of them instead of the mushrooms. Afraid to lose their likeness if
I waited to draw or paint, their images were etched into artist conks I collected with only a

\textsuperscript{8} Forests, Lands, and NR Operations, \textit{Polypores of British Columbia (Fungi: Basidiomycota)}, James Ginns,
pocketknife in the style of *plein air* painting. Instead of a subject, the mushroom now became a substrate—a vessel to narrow the gap between my fears and death, a proper liminal space. In addition to finding the unearthly qualities of spore prints, this method of etching made me want to couple them with images of animals with more intention and purpose. This led me to search for imagery that could adequately represent my spiritual investigations with these animals and mushrooms.

I looked back on some of the imagery I remembered from my days as a church goer. At that time, having grown up Catholic, I didn’t find the religious expectation of a heavenly afterlife to be a comfort. But now, the anticipation of an afterlife was something I wanted to explore. The religious idealism I studied became an aesthetic foundation for the dove in *Parking Lot Crucifixion* (Figure 7). Because the dove is a common symbol of the Holy Spirit from the Christian bible, I wanted to play on the pathos of the viewer by connecting the tragedy of its fate to that of Jesus Christ. The photo I referenced was taken by a friend who found a pigeon flattened to the pavement and several aspects of the photo share contextual similarities to Jesus on the cross. Seeing this photo for the first time was confusing. I was excited by the image’s striking composition but felt guilty about this excitement due to the bird’s unfortunate end.

Illustrating animals to represent purity, innocence, and piety in art is not uncommon or new. Docile livestock, such as the lamb, are especially used as placeholders for holiness. Francisco de Zurbarán uses a lamb to depict the cruelty inflicted on God’s son, highlighting humanity’s inherent evil (Figure 8).
The silhouettes made by the lines of the spores seemed ethereal, which sparked my initial curiosity for spiritual symbolism. Excited, I began studying art periods known for depicting figures of religious and spiritual importance, such as the Byzantine, Medieval, and Renaissance periods. Within these periods I identified and appropriated two key motifs: the light from the
transfiguration of Jesus Christ, and the halo. Artists such as Raphael and Buccio di Buoninsegna used these visual cues to indicate divinity and godliness. Raphael rendered light emanating from the body of Christ in the painting *Transfiguration* (Figure 9). In this painting, Jesus demonstrates a physical change into glory in front of three Apostles: Peter, James, and John. The light that pours out of Christ’s body is described in Matthew 17, “His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light.”

Buoninsegna painted *The Flight Into Egypt* (Figure 10) in which Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus flee from the persecution of King Herod. The use of halos separates them from common figures, as those who are not crucial to the biblical story are not paired with the motif. Their halos are painted with gold in a decorative pattern. Resembling a medallion, the careful details that surround their faces help convey their importance. I do not intend to highlight Christianity, sin, or any wrongdoings to garner guilt. Instead, I aim to highlight how reverence and appreciation are magnified when motifs such as the halo and rays of light are paired with a subject.

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9 Matt. 17:1-3 MSG
Figure 10: Duccio Di Buoninsegna. 1308 - 1311. Maestà; detail of front predella panel showing the Flight into Egypt. tempera and gold on panel. center: 42.5 x 44 cm. Flickr, accessed March 9, 2023, https://flic.kr/p/ZomH9m “‘Flight in Egypt’ - Detail of ‘The ‘Mae stà’ (1308-1311) by Duccio di Buoninsegna (Siena about 1255-1318/1319) from the Cathedral of Siena, now at ‘Museo dell'Opera del Duomo’ at Siena” (Public Domain Mark 1.0) by Carlo Raso.
Because my intention is to depict the decay of these animals with reverence, handling their distortion became crucial. I shifted away from traditional screen-printing methods towards a process with water-soluble crayons to create editions through a mesh screen. This method allowed each image pulled to describe the stages of decay. With every transfer, pigment is moved, mixed, and reapplied. In *Al Pasto, By The Lake And Shells*, and *El Dragón Durmiendo* (Figure 11, 12, and 13), the image of the animal referenced is changed by adding new crayon marks. I traded the concept of a ghost image from its practical use for an intentional method of interpreting the breakdown of organic matter. Like Kusozu, the Japanese art of depicting human decomposition, each stage of decay is demonstrated by a milestone caused by the environmental interactions with the body. The Japanese Buddhist monks painted these images to create an aversion towards the female body, as the temptation of flesh is discouraged. *El Dragón Durmiendo* contains a bloom of spore prints encircling it, similar to the sixth image from *The Death of a Noble Lady And The Decay Of Her Body* in which small animals feed on a noble woman’s carcass (Figure 14).

Decay is a breakdown of a thing’s state; even more, it is a shift that progresses in increments, blurring boundaries. Julia Kristeva writes about the repulsion this blur creates in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Abjection is a moment in which we reject, even retch, at the thought of ourselves as both subject and object, all at once. This repulsion typically happens when things that work within our identity to live, such as food, fluids, and body parts are altered and no longer serve those expectations. It disturbs the false security that we cannot be whittled down to pieces and waste, causing cognitive dissonance and panic.\(^\text{10}\) Our physical,

emotional, and mental separation from death has excluded us from seeing it as a source of appreciation and humility. I think of sleepless nights as a kid where I would cry and stress at the thought of not knowing what the lack of consciousness would feel like. However, the thought of what would happen to my body after my death was not a part of that fear. In that, I recognized the object that is my body and accepted its connection to the life cycle. Paul Thek in *Beneath the Skin: In Conversation with Gene Swenson* poignantly explains this acceptance when speaking of his interaction with Baroque crypts in Sicily:

> There are eight thousand corpses - not skeletons, corpses - decorating the walls, and the corridors are filled with windowed coffins. I opened one and picked up what I thought was a piece of paper; it was a piece of dried thigh. I felt strangely relieved and free. It delighted me that bodies could be used to decorate a room, like flowers. We accept our thing-ness intellectually, but the emotional acceptance of it can be a joy.  

I connected to the idea that there is a possibility of appreciating the body after it has stopped living. Rather than feeling disgust and sadness for the animals that were dead on the trails I walked, I began seeking out textures and colors I found interesting. While the animals in the Kusozu are meant to disgust the viewer, the spores are meant to be inviting. The feeling of abjection in witnessing the half-eaten fish is being subverted with the use of both the spores and the halo. I want *El Dragon Durmiendo* to be viewed as something welcoming, not gruesome.

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Figure 11: Brittney Fucheck. 2021. *Al Pasto*. Water soluble crayons, transparent acrylic base on paper. 22x30 in.

Figure 12: Brittney Fucheck. 2021. *By The Lake And Shells*. Water soluble crayons, transparent acrylic base on paper. 22x30 in.
Figure 13: Brittney Fucheck. 2021. *El Dragón Durmiendo*. Water soluble crayons, transparent acrylic base on paper. 22x30 in.

Figure 14: *Kuzōsu: The Death of a Noble Lady And The Decay Of Her Body*. Sixth painting. Watercolor. Artstor, accessed Jan 23, 2023, [https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/24788070](https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/24788070) (CC BY 4.0) [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)
ANIMALS AND INTERPERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Mr Romanoff is in the mushroom class. He is a pharmacist and takes color slides of the fungi we find. It was he who picked up a mushroom I brought to the first meeting of the class at the New School, smelled it, and said, ‘Has anyone perfumed this mushroom?’ Lois Long said, ‘I don’t think so.’ With each plant Mr Romanoff’s pleasure is, as one might say, like that of a child. (However, now and then children come on the field trips and they don’t show particular delight over what is found. They try to attract attention to themselves.) Mr Romanoff said the other day, ‘life is the sum total of all the little things that happen.’ Mr Nearing smiled.12

During the transition between depicting mushrooms to portraying animals, something surprised me. My studio mates began participating in my work by finding dead animals and notifying me about their whereabouts. The more people around me knew about my work, the more coordinates, maps, and photos of animals moved aside for me to find were sent to my phone. Even strangers stepped in to acknowledge the roadkill I had been picking up. I considered the idea of precarity and how it applied to me. The only way I could be closer to those who wish to be close to me is to be vulnerable. Whether it was for me or for the animals, I was comforted by the fact that people cared enough to do something, and that these animals were no longer being overlooked. What is particularly remarkable are the individuals who voiced hesitancy about my artistic labor, yet still pick up and drop off dried animals they find into my studio space. From what I have been told, they do it hoping I can honor the animals in some way. Some people even cushioned the animals in protective boxes and cups. I found this level of care and consideration very endearing and tender. Naturally, I kept these animals for artwork as they had become relics of people’s efforts and affection.

Enchanted by the mummified animals given to me, I adjusted my application of material

to capture their textures in ways that could highlight their dried skin and prominent skeletal structure. *What Holds Me To You* (Figure 15) and *Una Cinta Como Evidencia* (Figure 16) does this exclusively with line and color. Using reds, browns, and yellows as symbolism for bodily fluids, I accentuate parts of the animal’s skin that has puckered, wrinkled, or sloughed off completely. Even though these associations should heighten the grotesque state of the animal’s body, it instead endows vitality back onto it without dismissing the decay it has experienced. In studying them a little longer, I found crevices, folds, and bumps I never noticed before. The colors applied in my charcoal drawings are overtly tied to my intentions of subverting the Abject. Kristeva made it a point to emphasize how severed body parts and fluids caused severe reactions of repulsion, so I chose colors that directly represent these things.

My inclination to handle these animals is in part knowing that others are participating. A good portion of my anxiety is fearing the abrupt end of my relationships, and in my renewed awareness, I try to seize as many opportunities as possible to enjoy them. Building this niche community of finders and givers has comforted me with the prospect of new moments and memories with others. As Tsing says it, “These livelihoods make worlds too—and they show us how to look around rather than ahead”.¹³ As I hoped, people began to notice, and in seeing, they exercised consideration for these animals.

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Figure 15: Brittney Fucheck. 2021. *What Holds Me To You*. Graphite, charcoal, conté crayon, and china marker on paper. 11x17 in.
My interest in the relationship between violence and nature led me to the works of Ana Mendieta. During the early 1960’s the United States secretly transported thousands of children from Cuba to escape the Fidel Castro regime in a program called Operation Pedro Pan. Being a Cuban artist who immigrated through this exodus at the age of 12, her otherness allowed her to seek a sense of belonging in unconventional making. In particular, her earthworks and bloodworks were meant to demonstrate artistic integrity and reveal humankind's and nature's

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In Mendieta’s *Silueta* series (Figure 17), methodical destruction can be associated with shaping identity through trauma by creating impressions of the body against Earth. Mendieta used her own body for extended times in soil, snow, and vegetation, to explore her relationship with the life cycle. In my case, the pictogram on *Parking Lot Crucifixion* encapsulates the coexistence of atrocity and reverence. Mendieta explored the ideas of death, dying, violence, femininity, and the relationship she had with nature and her ethnic roots. Unfortunately, Mendieta died under suspicious circumstances in which her husband Carl Andre had been accused of pushing her out of their apartment window. Her tragic end only echoes her very relevant concerns.


BURIAL VERSUS CEREMONY

I thought back to the origins of my investigation and how timid I felt toward the dead animals. I also thought about my mother and how hard it must have been for her to see the animals she found on the road suffering, yet she stayed with them. Initially, while navigating my relationship to death and decay, I was challenged by a viewer about whether I had fully confronted my apprehensions. In the most constructive way possible, they told me, “It is pretty easy to talk about decay in an air-conditioned room, you know.” It took me by surprise. Much like grief, we tend to philosophize how we should react and process something. However, experience is the only way to find out how we actually handle adversity. I recall the deer that sparked my interest during my undergraduate program. My genuine interaction with the animal’s unrecognizable body taught me more than some distant meditation over death. In this reevaluation, I ruminated on my mother's experience with dying animals. Over the years, she developed a death doula practice of finding animals right as they are about to die. While doulas are most associated with childbirth, like midwives, similarly, death doulas accompany and soothe the dying. Inspired by her compassion and the honest feedback received during my early works, I forced myself out of that air-conditioned room and did something for the dead animals I noticed so often. I closed the physical gap between myself and the animals and picked them up to later bury. Originally wanting to use the remains of the animal, I dug holes deep enough to keep predators away and placed them in bags to keep the bones intact after their bodies were fully absorbed back into the Earth. Documentation is always encouraged when making a new body of work, so as a mature artist I considered it.

This shift began my photographic series of burials and how the documentation allowed
me to explore the meaning of ceremony. In having the accountability of proof through these photos, I asked myself if what I was doing was worthwhile, knowing someone might see these images.

Burial is interesting. It is used both as a space to indicate an end and a beginning. The same holes we dig for dead bodies can also be the nesting ground for seeds and plants. In this sense, burials can also be called a liminal space. *Black Cat* (Figure 18) is a cat that a friend of a studio mate had found. Mangled and torn open, I carefully transported it to the location I had been given permission to use so it may have a quiet burial. I placed the cat inside a plastic bag for sanitation purposes, not thinking of the implications or associations of the material at the time. The fruit paired with the cat was out of a sudden compulsion to make an exchange with the animal. Because I intend to rediscover purpose for the body after the Earth naturally processes it, I became hyper-aware of decisions that might perpetuate exploitation. My urge for equity resulted in this seemingly arbitrary exchange.

Initially, the idea was not to record any evidence, as the suggestion to do so at the time was more for my records than an actual part of my practice. That is, until I saw the value and agency in doing it intentionally. The moment I performed a spiritual gesture with the fruit seen in the initial images, the practical labor of burying these animals became ceremonial. I then turned to other materials, such as sage and lavender, to symbolize comfort and guidance. Burning herbs, or smudging, is traditionally performed by indigenous cultures to cleanse and purify. The smoke from the bundle acts as a connecting trail between the individual and spirit.16 Treating the body

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and soul with the same consideration, I purposely bury the unburnt sage with the animal, as seen in *A Deer And Paracord* (Figure 20) to restore dignity to the animal’s body. These exchanges influenced the way I handled the composition and presentation of the images. Photographs became central for me to bring the audience closer to decay and death.

Figure 18: Brittney Fuchek. 2021. *Black Cat*. Digital photograph.
Because of the reflective plastic bags, my camera's flash created an aura of light around the subject when taking the photograph. While this light is enchanting and descriptive of the physical qualities of the materials used, it is not descriptive enough to translate the emotional experience I had when picking up these animals. I wanted my viewers to understand the boundaries I tried keeping in mind when interacting with them, which led me to projecting these images onto walls and fabrics. The interaction a participant can have with these projections is one of two decisions, to respect the boundary of the light’s trail by not interrupting the image on the surface, or to block the path using one’s body. Both decisions give the audience agency over their indirect contact with the animal.

During this transition, I became familiar with the idea of rituals, giving me better context for Ana Mendieta’s *Silueta* series (Figures 19). The animals I discover and bury, similar to Mendieta’s body cradled into the Earth, make an impression that emphasizes process and mystery. Both works omit the creator and action of how these holes are made, making them suggest the idea of these works being phenomenon, or the result of a universal entity. As her practice allowed her to connect with her Cuban roots, mine are to connect with my mother and her mother’s relationship with the animals they have raised. Leaning into the ambiguous burial silhouette encourages the viewer to further investigate the image. Mendieta’s more central compositions are especially striking, as they resemble tombs or a sacred space. I appropriate her strategy in having a confrontationally centered figure.

Privacy is crucial in these bodies of work. The labor that goes into these ceremonies takes a toll, physically and mentally. I want others to empathize with my boundaries by respecting my reluctance to show the visceral images of the animals I find. My only avenue for viewers to understand the contents of the bags is through expository titles. This normally includes the type
of animal that was picked up and an additional description of what happened to them. If something in particular stands out and feeds into a sentimental narrative, I will include that too. This is seen in *A Deer And Paracord*. This deer had been spotted by a few classmates behind our shared studio building and had been in an irrigated ditch with its spine severed from its legs. Thankfully the water was low enough for me to retrieve the remains, however, upon collection I discovered that its legs had been tied by the joints with paracord: a hunter’s rope. The only conclusion that seemed logical is that it had been a young deer illegally shot and killed near the property, explaining the unusual location where it had been found. I was angry at first, but that anger slowly turned into a sense of duty to treat it with kindness, regardless of whether it was alive or dead. Creating artwork and performing acts of goodwill is a form of defiance against anyone who considers these animals worthless and undeserving of respect.

Figure 20: Brittney Fucheck. 2021. *A Deer And Paracord*. Digital photograph.
For me, ceremony is about the physical acts of care, along with the emotions that motivate them. The question I began to ask myself was “how could I highlight my compassion in these images?” The many artificial hills in Florida show us that even garbage is buried, so how could I separate my burials from the landfills we encounter? Looking at how the Ancient Egyptians and Mayans used cloth to mummify their dead, it dawned on me that the practice of swaddling the dead in fabric might have been less of a practical one and more of a gesture of
care and consideration for the deceased. In addition to the fruits and herbs, the material embracing the bodies of these animals needed to be symbolic as well. In *Opossum Cradled In Satin* (Figure 21), I crafted a bag out of shiny, synthetic fabric capable of paralleling the way the camera flash reflects off of the plastic I originally used. This new material was still plastic based, but its’ use had more intent and consideration.

Because of this, I avoided items that seemed apologetic, such as flowers. That is, until I came across the photography of Paul Koudounaris. His macabre interest and love for wildlife led him to a similar practice of hosting roadkill ceremonies. Residing in Arizona, Koudounaris photographs roadside funerals that are vibrant, decorative, public, and sentimental. Placing the fabrics and offerings with consideration, he handles the animals with respect (Figure 22). What separates Koudounaris and me is how we view humanity through these encounters. The locations where he finds these animals are notorious for their neglect and abuse. Understandably, a location in which pet dumping happens can easily set the stage for resentment towards humanity. Where I find animals is seemingly arbitrary, allowing me room to focus on the importance of forgiveness towards people, as well as my care for the animals. Along with broadening my color palette and materials with flowers, I welcome added sentimentality and tenderness into my photographic series.

As a result, *Buried Deer* (Figure 23) is the start of this shift in offerings. Wanting these images to reflect the diversity of animals I found, whether big or small, mammal or reptile, I would switch up their offerings to individualize them. For this photo I had to rent a U-Haul to carry a large female deer that had died behind the house of one of my classmates. It seemed that she might have injured herself trying to reach the fruits of a loquat tree that was out of reach because of a fence. I took fruits from the tree as an offering for her.
Just bleak, and there's nothing more I can make out of it. A scene that makes me want to wretch but I can't turn my back on them. I did not even know what they were when I pulled over, I don't know how many times they must have been hit, scarcely anything left but legs. But then I saw the curve of the skulls and I understood: these weren't wild dogs. Puppies. Two little puppies, the kind that are supposed to grow up in the homes of humankind, chewing on shoes, running and yelping, maturing into beloved members of the family, and growing old as trusted companions. Poor things. How they wound up out here I cannot say, too many questions, and none of them are really relevant in the moment. Whoever they were and however they came to this road, they came together, passed together, and while that journey was much too short they will now run free together, eternal companions. Perhaps there is some comfort in that, to not be alone.17

(Paul Koudounaris, 2021)

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17 Paul Koudounaris, “Just bleak, and there's nothing more I can make out of it,” Instagram photo, June 24 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CQgtBmQnt16/
Likewise, the titles reveal whether the animal might have been feral or domestic (Figure 24). Names carry a lot of humanity in them. It is how we identify people. Revealing whether an animal was wild or a pet in the title gave me a way to give context while also ensuring privacy. While encountering any dead animal is heartbreaking, the hardest ones to face are the ones we raise. They are companions that we willingly integrate into our lives knowing we will typically outlive them. My pets were the first introduction to death at a young age. The first few times my animals died were a bit awkward, as I did not fully understand the situation or significance. One pet loss that stuck with me was my hamster, Chippy, who passed away at a normal age but was left in his cage for a week. I noticed something about him was off. I did not understand why he was so still and was too afraid to tell my mother. She eventually found him and created a story that he had grown too old and was sent away to a place called Rainbow. She had even gone out of her way to inform some of the employees of the PetSmart where we bought him of her elaborate story. When she took us back to look at more hamsters, the story seemed credible and erased any suspicion from me as a young child. This was her best attempt at emotionally protecting me and my brother from the devastation of losing him. Eventually, I found out the truth a few years later and had my hunch of his death confirmed. Although this loss does not lessen the blow of losing future pets, or people for that matter, it helps me better understand death’s indiscrimination and sit with the emotions that may or may not come with it.
Figure 24: Brittney Fuchek. 2022. Enzo. Digital photo.
Documenting my burials helped me prefer the idea of indicating a body instead of revealing it. Since I planned on revisiting my animal graves, I explored grave markers from other cultures. Being of Chilean descent, I referred to traditional Chemamull artwork belonging to the native Mapuche people. These wooden statues stand around 1 to 6 meters tall and represent individuals who have passed (Figure 25).\textsuperscript{18} As grave markers, they are spiritual locomotives that guide the deceased into the afterlife. The anthropomorphic features and scale of a Chemamull amplify a sense of transcendence, informing my later work.


With every spiritual transaction, I garnerered more affection in the materials I used. After researching commonly known cultures who perform ritualistic burials, such as those in Egypt and Peru, I looked back on research I had initially started during my undergraduate degree. In recalling my early art history classes, I renovated my understanding of Chinese burial suits from the Han dynasty (Figure 26). Through painstaking cutting and crafting, artisans made these funeral suits out of jade to honor their royalty. The ranking of the individual is revealed in the wires used. Gold for emperors, silver for their children, and copper for the children of their children. Each suit is unique and crafted with high regard for the individual who has passed. Jade, as described by the St. Louis Art Museum, “...was believed to keep away evil; when taken internally it conduced to immortality; it preserved the body from decay after death; it aided the resurrection of the body after death...”¹⁹ The use of something precious, like Jade, left me in awe. Between my historical studies of different cultures and my contemporary research on artists like Koudounaris and Mendieta, I decided to make material significance my primary focus.

Eventually object-making began to seep into my practice. The very first cat I buried was later exhumed in an attempt to reconstruct its body into something worth admiring. Instead of leaving it to advance into the next natural step of decay, I used its remains to construct an object that reflected a physical rebirth. Mobile (Figure 27) brings attention to this post-death possibility. More than transform, Mobile transmutes the animal. Transformation is the change of a thing’s structure,²⁰ while transmutation is when a thing is altered into a completely different form.²¹ After its flesh had been fully processed in the earth, the remains were washed and sanitized.

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wrapped the bones in wire, copper, shells, fungi, human hair, and pine needles and connected the pieces with copper wire. My Chilean heritage led me to discover that the largest exporter of copper in the world is Chile. Because of my familial ties to the country and material, I felt compelled to extract the importance of this precious metal. Copper is needed for power transmission to keep our electricity use efficient and is sprayed on our agriculture to keep away fungi and promote plant growth. It has so many uses that are vital for growth and comfort. Most importantly, copper has medicinal properties: it is antiseptic, antiviral, and antibacterial. It is a metal that heals.22

Figure 26: 113B.C. *Jade Suit Sewn with Gold Thread, Shroud for Tou Wan Western Han: det.: bust.* Artstor, accessed March 4, 2023, https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003296181

Figure 27: Brittney Fuchek. 2021. Mobile. Animal bone, human hair, fungi, pine needle, copper wire, pond mussel shell. 9x23x9 in.
Upon losing access to the backyard I used for my burials, I took it as a sign to stop agonizing about whether they were done perfectly. Instead, I prioritized how I could continue the rituals and transitioned from burials (Figure 28) to roadside ceremonies (Figure 29). What once was a private act evolved into a public one. Others could now see my gestures of kindness and perhaps reconsider why someone would go out of their way to handle a dead animal with care. I continued to explore materials that could hold a better sense of preciousness. Synthetic fabric does an adequate job of wrapping and embracing the animal's body but does not hold the symbolism of natural fabrics: connotations of commercialism and industry are too deeply embedded. Because of the plastics used for their fibers, I worried about the ecological effect of using polyester in the soil and how the association of trash could be connected to my ceremonies again. My work is typically met with openness and empathy; however, I had an occasion in which someone described the animals as garbage. This gave me a moment to reflect on how I utilized my materials effectively while conveying my intentions accurately. Switching from synthetic to organic fabrics, as seen in 20 Pound Bunny (Figure 28) to Soft Shelled Turtle (Figure 29), I dissolved my last bits of worry about how I wrapped these animals and the long-term environmental effects I could potentially cause.
Figure 28: Brittney Fucheck. 2021. *20 Pound Bunny? (Raccoon)*. Digital photograph.


For clarity’s sake, my work aims to ignite initiation and acknowledgment for these animals, not so much the encouragement of handling their remains. This recognition is how I exercise my compassion and how I also carry that experience over to my loved ones. I recall a similar encounter my mother had with a bird. While driving home from work, she saw a car strike an animal in front of her, and then drive away. The animal scuttled quickly to the side and collapsed onto the grass. It turned out to be a goose she had been feeding in her backyard and seeing the animal brutalized sent her through an emotional flurry. Her immediate reaction was to hate and curse humanity. She did not and still does not understand how anyone could harbor so much disregard for a living thing. For context, she hated this bird. It was territorial, loud, and made a complete mess of the backyard where she placed kibble. However, realizing how easily it
could die, she understood it was not much different from the other animals she looked after, even though it was not as friendly. As she spoke with me on the phone while this was happening, she was crying and stroking the feathers of this bird—soothing it as much as she could. Suddenly, she stopped crying. I asked her what was wrong, and she replied, “He’s just so beautiful.” She quietly continued crying and caressed the animal until it passed. Before heading home, she told me every color she saw in its feathers. If it were not for this encounter, I do not believe my mother would have discovered this genuine love for the animal. In moments of vulnerability, doors open for compassion, empathy, and understanding.

I will never forget how upset she was over that goose. Or the time she saved a kitten and took it to a shelter, only to find out that she had taken it to a kill shelter and by the time she went back to adopt the cat, they had already euthanized it. And the time she discovered an opossum hidden in the bushes of her front yard with its sinuses dripping because it was in its final stages of disease. Regardless of the kind of animal I have picked up, my mom always comes to mind. My journey with these animals has been similar to hers, in which our encounters awaken our realization of the preciousness, and fragility, of their lives. Through my depictions and ceremonies, I connect my hopes of finding ways to accept their deaths with grace, as well as accepting my mother’s eventual passing. Making this work is a way to comfort her as much as it is to comfort me.

Considering the gravity of this insight, the images of these animals needed to exist beyond the confines of my phone. I was not doing them justice by keeping them to myself, so I printed them back on the same material I use to wrap them (Figure 30). The connections between silk and the fragility and resilience of the body are strong. Much like the body, silk can be distressed and destroyed easily, yet it can withstand weight and high pressure. I scaled up their
images, making them larger than life. The intention to change their size was similar to that of *Study of a Deer* in which I attempted to draw the viewer closer to death. However, it is in the acts of kindness towards the animals that their size was expanded. Because the majority of the animals I find by the roadside are small, making their images as big, if not bigger, than a person would make their burial images even more impactful, more human. It is a way for my viewers to connect with my personal history and hopefully find grace towards death.

Figure 30: Brittney Fucheck. 2022. *Campus Lizard*. Photo on silk. 42x61 in.
Before losing the location for my burials, I did not see these burials as a final resting place for the animals. I saw them as a stopping point of their body’s journey into becoming something else. The body had been disrespected, sometimes beyond recognition, and the act of burying them was the first step in clarifying its value beyond a thing that simply lives and dies. These animals are not being put away permanently. Instead, I reassembled some of them into a form that amasses admiration. I imagined what a constructed resting place looked like for these animals and gathered materials that could accomplish a larger scale. After Mobile, I felt limited by the scale and wanted to emphasize these acts of kindness I performed in larger artwork.

In Crib (Figure 31) the materials used are representative of the lengths I will go to protect and soothe. Despite the branches being brittle and the pine needles less than ideal for bedding, this constructed visual for devotion is strong with its crude rendering of a nursery bed. One of the most pertinent parts of this sculpture is the fabric in the middle. It had swaddled the deer in A Deer And Paracord. Ironically, certain hunters have a principle of using every part of the animal as a sign of respect. It is a way to show that the animal had not died in vain. Making larger sculptures that allowed me to reuse the same fabrics that coddled the animals I buried was an extension of moving my artwork towards a public space.

When building Crib, I felt permission to pause and sit with the assembled objects. This gave me time to appreciate the small details I found in the wood and metal. Twisting copper coils for each branch allowed me to slow down mentally and sit with my emotions. Because I still felt scared about losing my mother, even after all of the animals I had encountered, making Mobile and Crib gave me permission to be patient with myself and how uncomfortable I still felt towards death.
How these materials interact in *Crib* is similar to Andy Goldsworthy’s approach to land art. Coincidentally, it was my mother who introduced me to Goldsworthy. We watched *Rivers and Tides* together and were awestruck with the way he considers the materials and space. Originally from England, Goldsworthy searches for the energies that primordially run through nature. Using materials such as wood, snow, ice, and other natural items found in the local UK environment, Goldsworthy makes sculptures and site-specific works that pay tribute to the unseeable forces of nature (Figure 32). As coined in “Provisional Theory of Nonsites,” by Robert Smithson, Goldsworthy explores his work within two categories, site and nonsite. Site being the

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location from which the materials and land art originally came, while nonsite being the removal of such materials into other spaces, typically an indoor setting.²⁴


Because my work resides between precision and organic forms, I looked towards other artists to help me clarify my content and material relationship. Alexander Calder, the father of the mobile, balanced simplified geometric and organic forms with metal wire to playfully interact with the space they entered.\textsuperscript{25} His implied lines through balance and placement were elements I explored after making my first mobile.

On top of the impressive physics of his general body of work, I began to note the clearly defined patterns in Calder's mobiles that I found in some of my materials. Works like \textit{Sumac With Gong} (Figure 33) use shapes and lines that mimic the flow of foliage swept up by wind without being too visually descriptive. The escalating scale of each red plate, leading up to the golden “gong” can be read as a crescendo of direction and movement. I noticed that these works, even when calmly orbiting around their own centers, have a great deal of animation when the eye travels through them. \textit{Mobile}, although filled with moments that invite the viewer to appreciate its assembly, does not have the emotional orchestra to elevate it beyond the basic symbolism of rebirth. Studying Calder opened up the exploration of whittling down materials to their bare minimum; how the distinction of a material’s existence can speak clearer than its possibility to describe something outside of itself. Calder nurtured a space for objects that highlight a world in which humanity and nature have a strong chemistry and compatibility.

Thinking of the stillness of my sculptures in contrast to the speedy and dynamic lines of my monotypes and drawings, I explored the possibility of two options: To add chaos to the visual turbulence of my work or to whittle it down elegantly. My curiosity led me to the works of Lee Bontecou. Fueled by the anxieties of international political turmoil, Bontecou converts man-made materials into organic objects with the intent of revealing the catastrophes of war and curiosity for the unknown.26 Her 1960’s body of work piqued my interest. Using scraps of metal, canvas, rags, and other debris from the streets and shops of New York City, as described on a gallery label from "Collection 1940s—1970s" in 2019, she creates abstract forms that challenge the arbitrary standards of sculpture and painting.27

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The most recognizable of these forms, the giant gaping holes that protrude violently off the walls, implode with the latent fear, hate, hope, and wonder of humanity.\textsuperscript{28} Having the pleasure of examining \textit{Untitled} (Figures 34) up close, the carefully adhered fabrics and metals, remnants of glue, and kinked wire invited me to think of my body’s relationship to the piece. It is horrendous yet simultaneously compelling. The combination of shine, grime, and my ill temptation to touch something so threatening drove me to make \textit{Todo Es Hogar} (Figure 35).

\textsuperscript{28} MoMA, Museum of Modern Art
Figure 35: Brittnay Fuchek. 2022. *Todo Es Hogar*. wood, wax, copper, wire, Spanish moss, animal bone, fungi, seashell, projection, fabric. Dimension variable.
Once I knew the nature of my work helped others to acknowledge the dead animals that commonly surround us, I built an installation that could better demonstrate that act of looking around. Julie H. Reiss speaks about the idea of different categories for installations. The two most prominent ones she mentions are environments versus assemblages. Environment is described as something that must be walked into and through to be experienced. In contrast, an assemblage is put together and walked around.29 The portals seen in Bontecou’s sculptures sparked the need to push my viewers to become participants. Instead of distantly witnessing the work, they now play an active role. I hope to make a work that can entice the viewer and bring them into a new environment where they can take agency over their interaction with the piece.

To do this, I use textures that are meant to draw in while also repelling the viewer, similar to Bontecou’s assembly for her objects. The wax that covers the Spanish moss in my installation absolutely consumes the branch it is attached to. Its drippy appearance raises questions on just how haphazard these objects are put together (Figure 36, 37). Using weight to balance the position of my branches changed the way I placed my hanging elements in the installation. Depending on how the branches interact with one another I can create horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines. This can create areas of harmony or chaos within negative and positive space, similar to both Bontecou and Calder.

29 Julie H. Reiss, From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001), xii-3.
Since my installation can be rearranged indefinitely, I felt the need to echo the changing nature of space, similar to Joseph Beuys’s 7000 Eichen (Figure 38). Having almost died in an airplane crash as a Luftwaffe pilot during World War 2, his proximity to death led him down a path of reconciliation with his humanity and nature. 7000 Eichen is an ever-changing site-specific land art composed of 7000 oak trees paired with basalt stones. The weather simultaneously adds and subtracts to this piece: the basalts erode as the trees continue to grow taller and change with the seasons. The contrast between life and death is paralleled by this changing land art. As trees are common symbols for the start and maintenance of life, stones can be associated with the corporeal absence of the body. Todo Es Hogar behaves similarly. Whether the space calls for more or less branches, my installation shrinks and grows much like 7000 Eichen.
Figure 38: Joseph Beuys. 1988. *7000 Eichen*. Oak trees and basalt stones. Artstor, accessed on March 4, 2023, [https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_10310850796](https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_10310850796)
Making *Todo Es Hogar*, with how big and messy it is, gave me some time to think of the scariest artwork I have accomplished so far: the painting of my mother and me. I specifically made this painting large and with frantic marks because I felt that my emotions and fears were unavoidable and inescapable. This painting would have been different if I had made it smaller and neater. It would have felt less vulnerable, less urgent. Despite my mother being a single mother for most of my childhood, an immigrant who came to this country by herself, and having dealt with breast cancer, my mom is full of life. She is silly, beautiful, and eager to make any moment memorable. Her love and commitment to my brother and me are motivators in celebrating who she is. I want to honor her love for her family and the animals she cares about. Not only do I want to celebrate her while she is here, but I want to have the capacity to celebrate her in her absence.

One of the things my mother always told me was that if I found an opossum, I need to check their pouch. I had the opportunity to do this on a trip I took towards the West side of Florida. On my drive there I spotted one on the shoulder of the highway. I noticed two joeys hanging out from the pouch of the animal. The babies were bruised and still attached by the teat. Another car pulled over and the people contacted a friend who rehabs animals. “Sorry” the rehabber said “They’re too young to save. But just pull the mom and her joeys off from the side of the road. The mother will release a toxin in her milk. They will go to sleep soon.” It takes two hours for this toxin to release. I found this information is so alarming, so sad, and yet so unexpectedly sweet. I could not stop thinking about it. I had interacted with opossums before but this one was different. It felt much more significant. I needed to paint it bigger than any work I had done before with the animals. It needed to be as big as the impression it left on me.

The mother opossum’s evolutionary instinct to take the joeys with her left me wondering
about my own fate, innate care, and how these animals are actually surrogates for the people around me. I saw myself in these babies and how I used to feel when I first made Inseparable. If they are not ready to live separately from her, they will die. A part of me still finds difficulty in thinking of eventually being separated from my mom. Commemorating her love has given me some reassurance that her life is being extended into a legacy. Seeing the importance of celebrating her now might help me reconcile with losing her later. Unlike the joeys, my mother will not take me with her when she passes. I have the opportunity to continue living after she is gone. I need to hold that reality with gratitude and curiosity so that I can create a life worth living, despite hardship.

Figure 39: Brittney Fucheck. 2022. Euthanasia Milk. Acrylic on canvas. 62x90 in.
CONCLUSION

By converting my anxieties into curiosity, I developed a studio practice that paralleled how I process my emotional relationship with death. I explored two ideas, beginning with the scientific understanding of fungal decay and how mushrooms facilitate that role in the environment. This series of mushroom-themed works helped me confront the physical hesitations I had with death. Being physically close to decay increased my threshold for grief that comes with physical death.

My second investigation examined how I emotionally processed my intense attachment to my mother and her compassion for dead and dying animals. These two primary explorations allowed me to toggle between depicting what I observed studying fungal decay, and what I experienced using natural materials and processes that helped me reconsider how I cope with expected and unexpected loss. Hoping to overcome the dread of eventually losing my mother, my artwork commemorates her life and compassion for all living things. The kindness I intend to convey through my creative practice and output is accentuated whenever my audience embraces and internalizes the value I place on injured and deceased animals.

The mushroom paintings helped me develop the ability to scrutinize the things overlooked in my life. I inspected the indiscernible and used scale to either mirror or exaggerate my experience discovering mushrooms, and eventually, dead animals. From small, intimate paintings and prints, to larger, engrossing installations, the impact of these works is influenced by detail and scale in relation to the human body.

Ceremony is an act of care. More than care, it is a way for me to reconnect with myself and the people and experiences around me. In swaddling animals and holding them closer to me,
I pushed past my repulsion to decay and gave myself a moment to process my emotional aversion towards death. My photographs not only became evidence, but they were also a reminder to me of my capabilities to overcome my mental barriers toward death. Photographing these animals in silks and offerings gave me hope that they could be noticed and revered. Even more, how my readiness to interact with and photograph these dead animals allowed me to share my reflections on loss with others. The liberty to change scale with photographs pushed me to use natural materials in bigger works that convert the viewer into a participant.

Creating sculptures was a way for me to slow down. While two-dimensional works focused on depictions, the textures in my objects encourage viewers to notice peripheral experiences. This is especially true in my crib sculptures. While they primarily parallel the impossibility of my attempts to comfort an animal that is dead, they also provide an opportunity for viewers to appreciate a slower pace when looking for small details in the wood, wax, and copper. My first installation takes this further by urging the viewer to engage and inspect suspended elements. The unusual surface of dipping Spanish moss in wax becomes vital in initiating curiosity. It is in my rendering and handling of natural materials where individuals may pause and find the inherent worth within the animals I pick up.

Taking into account my personal and creative growth, I am still scared. I still feel the weight of my mother’s life on my shoulders. While my artistic practice has not removed all of my anxieties, it has served me well as a mechanism to address my fears and has shown me the importance of appreciating my loved ones and nuanced experiences. This realization is evident in the slowing down required to recognize and appreciate the mushroom and animal subjects in my work.

Through my artwork, connecting with my mother’s passion for caring for dying animals,
I have found tools in my practice that might help me with the uncertainty ahead. In becoming familiar with the natural phenomenon of death, I am developing a healthy expectation that I will lose the animals, and loved ones, as well. Although my grief might be great, it does not subtract from my love for life and others. Both can coexist. Setting my worries aside from the forefront of my mind and focusing on my current time with loved ones allows me to fully enjoy them without the distraction of fear. I hope viewers can find and appreciate important lessons I have drawn from my creative practice and utilize them to take a renewed willingness to work on their own uncertainties and relationships with others.
Hello Mr. Koudounaris!

My name is Britney Fuchek and I am a third year MFA candidate at the university of Central Florida. I am currently developing my thesis surrounding my art practice of death and appreciation. During my early research I found and bought your book Memento Mori and became enamored with your photography. I became even more fascinated with your roadside funerals once I found your Instagram, which parallels my own ceremonial practice with animals. I would love to reference this image and quote this caption with proper credit and citation if given permission in my paper. Thank you for your time and have a wonderful day!

Best,

Britney*

hexenkult

hexenkult Just bleak, and there's nothing more I can make out of it. A... […]

May 6, 2022 3:21 pm

Of course, feel free.

Thank you so much! I greatly appreciate it 😊

August 22, 2022 4:56 pm

Hello Again Mr. Koudounaris! I forgot to ask for the photograph information back in May so that I may cite it properly. Whenever you have the time, please send it in whichever format :) All I need is the title of the work, the medium, and the year (if it does not match the upload date). Thanks again!

It doesn't have a title. It's just a digital photo from 2021.
Brittney Fuchek

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Let me know if you have any questions.

All the best,
David Pozelle

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REFERENCES


Koudounaris, Paul. “Just bleak, and there's nothing more I can make out of it.” Instagram, June 24 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CQgtBmQnt16/


