

*Material Matters:  
Seeking Spiritual Understanding through  
the Physical*

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Bachelor of Social Work

Associate of Fine Arts

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Book Arts and Printmaking

The University of the Arts

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022

I am an artist who views everything in this world, the physical and spiritual, as being connected. I am drawn to finding connections everywhere—how one event leads to another, how the body is compelled to move when experiencing sound, how new thoughts can be inspired from receiving another person's words. Furthermore, I understand all physical matter to exist interconnectedly; I see that connections between separate things happen because of their movements and actions. Swirling particles of space dust gathered over eons to form stars and planets and became the building materials for life as we know it—water, dirt, bacteria, plants, humans, and other animals. The atoms which make up the minerals which make up the layers of rock that form a mountain did so through movement, the action of moving from one place to another to create those layers. Additionally, those same types of particles moved into other physical bodies, that of the plants, humans, and so on. For example, copper is an element which makes up a portion of our physical bodies and is necessary for a human body's proper functioning. It is also an element found within earth and rock. Therefore, elements of a mountain also reside within my body, and we are connected on a physical level.

Something I have thought about for a long time, and which shows up in my work, is how all matter is constantly in a state of change. This is currently explained by the second law of thermodynamics, a concept from the field of physics. Brian Greene, a physicist who specializes in string theory, states this law is "The tendency of physical systems to evolve toward states of higher entropy..." (156). And entropy is "counting the number of ways, consistent with the laws of physics, in which any given physical situation can be realized. *High entropy means there are many ways. Low entropy means there are few ways*" (152). Essentially, this law deals with statistics, and specifically, probability. Matter is statistically more likely to move towards a chaotic state than to remain in or revert to an ordered state (the latter is possible, but highly improbable when considering the sheer number of ways matter can exist). As an example, Greene says if you were

to remove two pages from a book, toss them into the air, then gather them from where they landed, the likelihood of them ending up in numerical order is 50/50. The more pages you tear out of the book and throw into the air, the less likely it is that all will end up in the correct order; the probability becomes 1 out of an increasing number of possibilities (151-155).

Entropy is why we experience the physical world as constantly changing, in either a perceived positive or negative way. High entropy is one of the forces behind decay, aging, and destruction, which we usually understand to be negative experiences. And low entropy manifests as life, growth, and creation, which we tend to look upon positively. One of the wonders of human life is our ability to shape matter into ordered states intentionally, such as creating a work of art.

You and I, as physical beings, are experiencing these changes, whether consciously or unconsciously, at any given moment, as is the rest of the physical world. I think these shared conditions and limitations of physical existence are why I feel empathy with my surroundings and why I seek understanding of my non-physical experiences through the lens of the physical. When I see an empty, crumbling building, I experience a bodily kinship with that broken structure. And as I feel that connection, I become aware of the parts of myself that feel broken and abandoned, feelings which reside in my body and can be physically felt while also being intangible, internal experiences. As I create art objects using various materials, the physical qualities of those materials and the connections I make between them and my physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual human experience become the foundation for my expression.

As an artist, I also wrestle with the limitations of physical existence, and address it in my work. Because we humans have the ability to use visualization and imagination to create unlimited possibilities within our minds, and because matter is mutable, I think we assume we

can turn our fantasies into reality by manipulating the world around us; we think we should have the ability to change certain things which we, in fact, cannot. This juxtaposition of fantasy and reality is at the heart of longing, an essential aspect of my artistic practice. Within longing, there lies an awareness of the temporary existence of all things, and we often mourn that fact. We know certain aspects of life are inevitable and, yet, still wish for them to be different. But as we feel those desires, we also know fulfillment of those wishes would not truly bring us happiness, because it would negate the value of what already is. For example, we long for our loved ones, and ourselves, not to grow old and die; but, if this became a reality, the nature of life itself would become meaningless. Much of my work expresses and explores the phenomena of longing. And sometimes my work reflects my desire to combat feelings of longing by focusing on and embracing the present moment—appreciating what exists now and what changes are currently taking place. This push and pull between mindfulness and longing can result in tension in my work—I am thinking about and expressing what exists versus what could exist. My work also embodies an openness of form, and pieces are often constructed with multiple parts and materials. This approach implies that the “final” form of a piece could change at any time.

The concept of time is a key component within entropy and longing and is also central to my work. We experience time both externally and internally, and sometimes those experiences are distinct, or in opposition to each other. In either case, time is understood through the experience of change—if nothing changed physically, in our bodies and our surroundings, it would feel like time had stopped. Those changes we see and feel in our physical bodies we call growth, aging, and healing. When we experience momentous, spiritual changes to our values, identity, and character, we might say we feel as if we have grown up or have lived another whole lifetime. Furthermore, I think we experience internal time in opposition to its unfolding in the external, physical world when we experience it through memory. Within my work, both memory

and behavior become the carriers for actions, movement, and change, and evoke a sense of time. I encourage the viewer, when experiencing my work, to feel that they are entering a space or environment within which events occur, things change, and time passes.

The last, vital piece of context for understanding my work and artistic practice is the concept of love. I am interested in exploring all facets of love, and I see it as a concept realized through actions. Love is an impetus behind many of the ideas and feelings I try to communicate in my art. Bell hooks begins her book of essays *All About Love: New Visions* by addressing our society's lack of a definition of love: "Our confusion about what we mean when we use the word 'love' is the source of our difficulty in loving" (3). And "When the very meaning of the word is cloaked in mystery, it should not come as a surprise that most people find it hard to define what they mean when they use the word 'love'" (4). Hooks goes on to reference a definition of love written by M. Scott Peck in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, that love is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (4). This definition encompasses the reason I make art. To nurture my own and others' spiritual growth through my career has been my primary motivation within various professions and, ultimately, why I choose to be an artist. Hooks' essays radically clarified my understanding of love by discussing it in terms of the actions that express love. The idea that love is realized through specific actions, those things we do to "extend" ourselves in the name of love, are when we truly experience love. Only after giving or receiving loving action do we then genuinely feel love. However, because we do not usually address love in this way, but approach it, instead, as an intangible concept and a feeling which we have no control over, we can become mislead and confused about what love looks like in our daily lives. Much of the longing I address in my art comes from times in my life when I felt a lack of love from others. And through longing, I am trying to make sense of those experiences.

I think about the desire for love as a driving force behind many of our behaviors. I see our experiences with giving and receiving love, or feeling the lack thereof, as playing a key role in the formation of our values and identities. While I believe all of this to be important and true, I also believe hooks' point that our society does not truly know what love is, even as we seek it out, and I am no exception to this observation. As I continue my work as an artist, I wish to explore how love can motivate us in all aspects of life, from the individual to global scale. I want to explore how a truer understanding of love can be used to construct societal systems which benefit everyone. I believe that love could be the solution to changing human perceptions of scarcity and separation to perceptions of abundance and interconnectedness in which all existence is held in equal value. Hooks also speaks about love as a system of ethics which could transform society: "Commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions" (88). I have come to believe that it is vitally important to human evolution to try to understand love, and so I must begin by deepening my own understanding.

## Transmutation within Process and Iterations

Throughout my graduate art school experience, I created work which speaks to transmutation through its potential to constantly become something else. I no longer view much of my work as reaching a fixed, final point, but as containing never-ending iterations. An example of this process lies within my pieces *A place to rest my skin* and *Flux*.

*A place to rest my skin* was inspired by the material and process I wanted to use, that of reduction wood-block carving. When I imagined myself carving into a block of wood, I connected the physical sensation of that action with the sensory experience of my skin. I also thought about wood as a living, breathing substance which acts as a conduit for nutrients to flow up and down the body of the tree, also like skin. When I thought about the reduction process, its quality of building a positive image by removing areas on the block reminded me of the mutable and regenerative attributes of skin—its constant shedding and loss, followed by the growth of new cells. As I thought about and connected to these qualities of skin, I felt a longing, a yearning for a sense of home, safety, and belonging. And I realized skin acts like a home. I began to think about it as a container for our physical and spiritual selves, a place of protection. I also thought about the way skin takes in information through physical interaction. It is sensitive, receiving experiences of the external and communicating it to the internal. It is a container, vessel, home, conduit, and carrier of both protection and vulnerability. That led me to see the imagery of the piece needed to evoke a sense of an embrace. I was reminded of the comfort of being held by another person, and how touching one's skin to another's in a gesture of care and sometimes protection speaks to love, which in turn speaks to home.

I looked at microscopic photographs of the epidermis, the outermost layer of skin, as a guide. Looking closely at its physical attributes mirrored the way I was examining it closely in a psychological sense. The resulting imagery was not a realistic rendering of skin, but an abstract landscape which evoked skin's organic, ever-changing nature. This organic part of the piece was portrayed as a form, folding over, or leaning onto, another stone-like form which appears hard and fixed, like a calcified memory. That inert shape suggests the futility in the other's embrace. I also wanted to address the regenerative nature of skin in this piece. I attempted this by cutting out areas of the organic form and curling them forward, to mimic the physicality of shedding skin.

Meera Mittal, *A place to rest my skin* 2021



This print tries to communicate many thoughts and feelings, and I realized a new iteration of it was necessary to explore some of these ideas further. So I incorporated the print into its next version, *Flux*. This piece is a woven structure which hangs from the ceiling and flows out onto the floor. I had made another edition of the reduction woodblock prints on mulberry paper to see how the use of a paper which felt and looked more skin-like would affect the work. I ended up feeling that these prints on their own did not add any meaning, so they laid in a stack for a while, untouched and unobserved. Later, as I thought about the original piece, I realized it did not express the transformative nature of skin as successfully as I would like. I wished to create a piece which delved deeper into this physical characteristic. I began to tear and weave some of the dormant prints together with one of the original prints on Stonehenge. I then manipulated more whole and torn prints, weaving them together, tearing holes into them, pulling woven pieces partially out, ripping the slits which they moved through, and arranging all of this to show various stages of transformation. I joined these prints into a sequence of panels which moves from an orderly state to something disintegrating and broken. The overall movement is from order to disorder, but each panel can be viewed as a moment of formation or disintegration, capturing a sense of the ebb and flow between high and low states of entropy. As I wove parts of this piece together to construct the whole and felt the pull of gravity combined with the support of the



weave, I felt the work's physical interconnectedness. And I realized that I was creating points of contact between moments of connection and separation.

Meera Mittal, *Flux* 2022



Sarah Sze is an installation artist who addresses the ways in which we experience and connect with materials, how we come to place value upon them through our actions, and our experience of time through memory and objects. I have felt drawn to Sze's work since the moment I was introduced to her, and in studying her work further, learned why I feel a kinship with her art despite our different visual languages. I sense the potential for her work to be iterative of itself, and she describes her pieces as having a "flexible, mutable quality" ("Sarah Sze in 'Balance'"). Sze's work also addresses entropy by manipulating materials to show how they can be changed to exist in different states. For example, in her piece *Hidden Relief* (2001), Sze peels paint

from the walls, bringing those strips out into space, and builds up her installation within those destructive and transmutative actions. She states that in her work “things could happen, things could fall apart” (“Sarah Sze in ‘Balance’”), an observation that speaks directly to the nature of entropy.

Sarah Sze, *Hidden Relief* 2001



Sarah Sze, *Portable Planetarium* 2010



In her TED talk titled “How we experience time and memory through art,” Sze says about her piece *Portable Planetarium* (2010), “I was thinking about our effort, our desire, our continual longing that we’ve had over the years, to make meaning of the world around us through materials.” Within every piece I make lies a homage to this same desire and longing, and it is at the core of my attraction to being an artist.

## Metaphor Within Materials

In this final semester of the graduate program, I have focused on developing a deeper understanding of my material choices and how they relate to my artistic expression. Because of the connection I feel with the physical world, and the connection I am aware of between my body and my internal, emotional being, I relate emotional qualities and internal experiences to the qualities of materials. In this way, the materials I use become metaphoric.

There is a phenomenon within psychosomatic studies and psychobiology which I call “body knowledge.” I became aware of this phenomenon when I was a young teenager in therapy. That therapist, in addition to several others throughout my life, asked me to focus on and describe where I felt certain emotions within my body, and how my body felt as I discussed various memories, experiences, and emotions. Through this practice I learned that emotions and the stories attached to them are housed within the body. A book I have been reading this year to expand my understanding of this subject and how it affects my art is *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* by Resmaa Menakem. Menakem’s book is rooted in body-psychology, a field which addresses how the body physically absorbs experiences and incorporates it into a kind of knowledge that is distinct from the knowledge of our minds. “Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains” (5). This aspect of our selves influences who we are, our worldview, our behavior, and our emotions. It shapes how we perceive, tell, and live out the stories of our lives. “The body is where we live. It’s where we fear, hope, and react. It’s where we constrict and relax” (7). I have discovered that what I express through making art is coming directly from my body and the experiences it holds. The physical form of a work comes from a part of my body that holds specific emotions and experiences that I am making external and visible to others. I believe

the experiences we have leave imprints within us that become a part of us and our truth. Through my work, I try to invite the viewer to visit their own internal spaces by connecting with their body. I also seek to create connection with the viewer, by making something that is intangible become something with which others can sense and physically interact.

My installation *What comes after...* was an example of using materials as metaphors and creating objects which felt like extensions of my body. It was also an exploration of the desire for answers and the futile search for knowledge through examining memories. Through the first iteration of this piece, I tried to communicate the idea of incomplete foundations, the act of examining incoherent memories, and the longing to build a new foundation by seeking answers within memories.

This piece has experienced multiple iterations and I believe will continue to do so, in part because the work must change along with the space in which it is installed. The space becomes a part of the piece and determines the interaction between the viewer's body and the work. I realized that when I set up this installation in any space other than the one it was to be exhibited in, I was making mockups. I did not truly make the piece until I was installing it in the exhibition space. Furthermore, I learned that my examinations of the memories which inspired the piece would change, as would my revelations from those explorations. It would become a piece which did not provide answers but rather focused on the absence of answers and the longing to find them.

The first iteration of *What comes after...* was made with whole bricks, handmade paper sculptures cast from my feet, dried flower garlands, loose flowers in various states of decay, planks of MDF covered in mirrored mylar, and a sound recording of bricks being moved from one place to another. The materials were arranged in groupings, the placements of which created a tear-drop shape on the floor. There was enough space between all the stations that a viewer could

enter from any point and navigate the entire piece however they wanted. This openness implied the way we might traverse and explore our internal selves. One of the groupings included a plank with piles of the heads of flowers, some fresh and some partially dried or decaying, loops of red thread, and a needle. Bricks were stacked behind this plank, providing a wall-like support. In another grouping, bricks were piled chaotically, loosely surrounding a plank which held a pair of shorts. The shorts were arranged so that the roundness of the legs which once occupied them was evident. A tower of bricks stood nearby with a pair of the delicate, hollow, cast paper feet slightly turned towards the shorts, and attached to the feet, a dried flower garland trailed down the tower onto the floor. More dried flower garlands snaked between, over and under the scattered bricks. These stations were moments of experience, points of clarity and confusion, and facets of stories which I looked at from different angles each time I visited the subject in my mind. The recording playing the sound of the bricks contacting each other evoked their tactility, and that of their being moved from one stack to another suggested an environment in which building, action, and movement were taking place.

Meera Mittal, *What comes after...* 2021 (details)



The second version of this piece, titled *New thoughts on old stories*, uses many of the same materials plus additional ones. Since making *What comes after...*, I have been pondering my

compulsion to derive the truth in family stories about events of which I have no memory. These stories have had a huge impact on my identity, emotions, and relationships, and yet I have realized that there has always been a tension that arises from a decision I must make: to accept these stories as factual past events and allow them to act as constructed memories, or to live with the fact that I will never know the truth and that knowledge will be forever lost.

For this piece, I broke the bricks with a chisel and mallet. It was physically taxing work. For a while, the material was stubborn and would not give way. I would hit harder, mustering my strength, but I noticed a hesitancy within myself, as well. A part of me was holding back from exerting my full force. Then, I discovered where the weak points on the bricks were and was able to break them more quickly. When I placed the chisel on those weak points, I could sense the material's vulnerability. At the moment of breakage, there was a split second when the hard, dense material suddenly felt soft, and the chisel felt like it was sinking into something sponge-like. As I broke down the bricks, I thought about what the previous iteration of the piece had meant to me. I felt the urge to reject the stories and the supposed knowledge they contained. I realized I had the power to break down that foundation, and perhaps build something new from the pieces.

I arranged the broken bits of brick in a pile, tucked into the corner of a floor to ceiling window. A silver basin with water and a fresh flower sits on top of the rubble heap, and dried flower garlands snake out of it, reaching out in different directions. One of the cast paper feet attached to a dried flower garland hangs suspended over the basin of water. The other foot is partially resting on the bottom edge of the pile of bricks, its toes touching the floor. More bricks lead out to the left of the pile, and line a pathway where sit the shorts, the other pair of paper feet, and two weathered, brass trays filled with offerings of dried flowers.



Both installations utilize multiple materials, all of which embody unique physical attributes which create the evocative nature of the piece. The bricks are raw, rough, and heavy construction materials. Rawness implies a sense that change in the form of building, or growth, can occur. Their texture, weight, and density are challenging to work with, and create a sense of solidity. The feet made from handmade paper were cast from molds of my own feet. The strength of abaca fiber combined with the delicacy of the cast paper forms evoke the endurance, fragility, and flexibility of the body and the self. They are hollow and, in both iterations, were placed low enough that the viewer could see into them. That emptiness takes on a presence and becomes an immaterial mark. The slight transparency of the feet evokes a ghostly quality. When I look at them, I feel like they try to physically embody my past self which only exists in the mind.

The flowers, being an organic material, are demonstrating the passage of time—any fresh ones which are added will decay and dry out. The dried flowers in the piece were once alive. I place the loose flowers in the piece as an offering, in a spiritual sense. I think of the garlands as umbilical cords, once vibrant and alive, carrying nutrients from one point to another. But in this piece, they eventually dry out and become remnants of their former state of being. They come from a starting point but lead to nowhere. They also become more tenuous and delicate over time, requiring more care as they become susceptible to crumbling. Inevitably, despite how much care is taken in handling them, they will eventually deteriorate entirely.

Meera Mittal, *New thoughts on old stories* 2022 (details)



An artist I have been looking at this year who uses materials as metaphors within her installations is Sheela Gowda. She uses the metaphor to explore political implications of materials. And like Sze, “Gowda’s work, using the most mundane...objects, displays the tense fraternity between matter and meaning” (Larios). Gowda’s work brings me to a body knowledge space when I look at the carefully but organically composed environments she creates, full of materials which evoke tactile senses. Her repetition of objects anchors her installations, creates a sense of rhythm, and allows for a viewer’s attention to see the environment as a whole piece. The objects within her installations often feel like bodies to me, such as in her piece *Stopover* (2012). In this installation, Gowda has arranged numerous grinding stones to fill a room and traverse the space. The stones are roughly-hewn, cube-shaped forms with a deep hole in the top in which whole spices could be placed for grinding into powder. The practice of installing these stones in the floor of houses is a thing of the past, and the reasons for that are political. “Once considered sacred objects, grinding stones became expendable with the influx of modern cooking equipment and, amid the housing boom, people simply abandoned them by the roadside” (Larios). I think that is why there is an intangible, impermanent feeling to this installation, despite the clear weighty presence of the stones. They have become artifacts, remnants of the past no longer animated by their interaction with the human touch. Some are arranged in clusters and others are more separated, also reminding me of people waiting at a train station, standing in groups, and milling about to pass the time. I interpret their formal qualities as both figurative and as describing an internal aspect of self. When I look at one of the stones in her piece, I feel like they are parts of me, externalized. Gowda also uses the cultural significance of materials to express meaning and content. Related to the way Sze uses everyday materials to explore the human desire to find meaning in life through objects, Gowda manipulates and dives deeper into the prescribed cultural significance of materials to say something more about the human experience.



Sheela Gowda, *Stopover* 2012 (detail)



## Collaboration and Sound

One of the most influential parts of my childhood upon my visual art language was music and sound. I grew up with my older brother who started learning music at a young age and went on to become a professional musician. Most of the music I grew up hearing in our house was jazz, from musicians such as John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, Chick Corea, Pharoah Sanders, and Ella Fitzgerald. Eventually, as my brother's exploration and knowledge of the genre grew, I was exposed to more contemporary jazz musicians, such as Rudresh Mahanthappa, Rachelle Ferrell, and Jason Moran. I would draw and paint in the same room with my brother while he practiced or listened to his latest acquired album. We would talk about the structures we heard, and the textures, colors, and atmospheres in the sound. Jazz combines structure, improvisation, and collaboration to create organic pieces rich with emotion, sensory experiences, and evocative internal and external spaces. The songs evoke environments and a sense of navigating through them. I have realized that the sounds, how they are put together and how they move and shift throughout a piece, become metaphors. There have been songs which, for me, evoked the sensation of walking through a city late at night, when it is quiet and the air is still, devoid of the movements of people and cars. Other songs simply evoked feelings such as tension, speed, fear, tenderness, inquisitiveness, or sorrow. Occasionally, a phrase in a sax player's

improvised solo would make us laugh, just from the sound quality and timing of it in context with the rest of the piece, as if the musician had just told the punchline of a joke. During these “art nights,” as my brother and I called them, I engaged in my own improvisational practice by painting or drawing to the music. I translated what I was feeling and sensing within the sounds into colors, shapes, marks, movement, and compositions that I saw in my mind’s eye, or simply felt. Just as the musicians in the recording listened and responded to each other, I listened and responded to them (or sometimes to my brother and what he was practicing or experimenting with). This practice is prevalent in my process of making art today, in that I am usually building a piece through a method of perceiving, sensing, and responding. Each of those steps in the process holds metaphor which is then translated into an artwork.

I also learned about absorbing sound and responding to it with movement through dance, which I began learning at age three. I took classes in various traditional, Western dances, such as ballet, tap, modern, and jazz, as well as ballet-folklorico from Mexico, and improvisational American Tribal Style belly dance, a style based on traditional Middle Eastern belly dance. Some of my favorite dance forms involved a collaborative, responsive style such as swing and salsa partner dancing. In these dances, one partner leads, improvising their movements while providing subtle cues to the follower, and the follower “listens” (in a kinesthetic sense) to those cues and responds with a prescribed movement that is connected to the cue. There are opportunities for the follower to improvise separately from the leader, as well. I love this kind of collaboration and the non-verbal communication it requires. I have also enjoyed doing collaborative visual art projects as well, which usually involves working directly with another artist to create a new piece together.

My video installation *She Sang/An Ocean in the Mouth* is a collaborative piece with vocalist Jasmine Wilson. This work expresses an internally felt physical experience of harmony

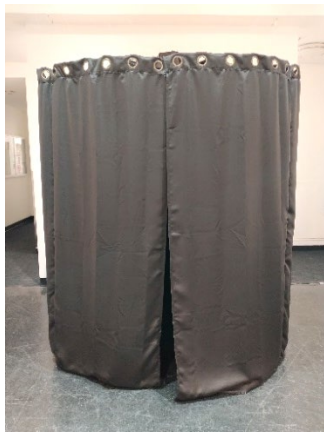
changing to disconnection and loss. It tells the story of that change through poetry, vocal artistry, sound, and an immersive video of the papermaking process. It is experienced individually within the dark, enclosed, and almost private environment of the installation.

Wilson and I began our collaboration after I had written the poem for the piece. We talked about what the poem meant in depth and detail, discussed the papermaking process, and I described my plans for recording videos of papermaking and pulp painting. Next, I made abstract pulp paintings while thinking about the poem and responding to the feelings and imagery within it. I also recorded myself creating sounds with a ukulele that suggested an internal space. Then, I shared with Wilson a video of the pulp paintings, the camera moving slowly just above the paper, exploring its landscape, combined with the ukulele sounds. I also sent her pictures of the dried pulp paintings. Wilson recorded herself reading the poem and adding humming and sounds, expressing her response to everything I had shared. I then made the final video in response to, and paired with, Jasmine's recording. This listen-and-respond process was conversational, and the collaboration presented me with opportunities to engage deeply with the creation of this work. I had to examine and describe the inner workings of the piece as it was developing to fully bring Jasmine in as a collaborator, and to understand how to move forward.

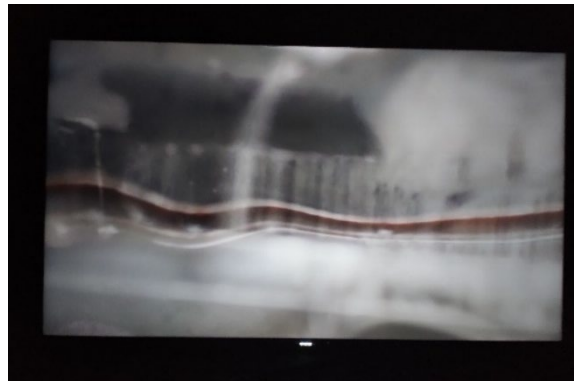
The final video is a layered composition of moments of papermaking and pulp painting processes. In conceiving of this project, I felt that the actions involved in papermaking and the physical qualities and behaviors of its ingredients were related to the poem. I sensed that the journey a bit of fiber takes through the papermaking process felt like the experience of the narrator. There are moments of being engulfed, being pulled, pressed, constricted, and of hanging suspended and inert. Papermaking begins with a beautifully cloudy, balanced vat of pulp and water, which then gets agitated and torn into by the dipping and pulling of the mould. The sheet of paper is formed through this act of resistance.

The structure housing the video creates an almost completely dark environment. It is built with blackout curtains suspended from the ceiling, curved in front, and protruding from a wall. Within the space, the sounds of dripping water, humming, and whispering float out from different directions. The video is playing continuously, and the viewer must put on headphones to listen, which enhances the internal experience. Because I am asking the viewer to engage in this private experience in a public setting, I am, essentially, inviting them to be vulnerable.

Curtain Installation



Meera Mittal and Jasmine Wilson, *She Sang/An Ocean in the Mouth* 2022 (video still)



In several of her works, the animation and video installation artist Tabaimo addresses hidden, internal turmoil existing within public settings. I was first drawn to Tabaimo's installations because of how immersive they were, their relation to the scale of the viewer's body, and how they used sound to take up space beyond the video. In my first time experiencing *Public Convenience* (2006), the scene showed the inside of a women's public restroom, and I could hear heels clicking on tile moving from somewhere behind me and towards the restroom before I saw a woman enter the space, her feet moving in time with the clicks. This use of sound made the entire room feel like it was part of the piece, and that we were all suddenly in the voyeuristic role of the unseen observer.

Tabaimo's surreal animations are captivating, and the strange and startling events which occur in her videos take place in familiar settings of daily life. For me, this combination highlights

the internal workings of things—individuals, the environment, society—which are active and alive, but are dismissed, suppressed, or ignored. A description of her work states, “Tabaimo populates her work with uncanny characters that, either through mutation or as victims of inexplicable violence, become fragmented in their relationships to the environment and their own identity. Installed in theatrical, stage-like settings, her work is attuned to the architecture and the viewers within it” (“Tabaimo”). I feel a kinship with Tabaimo’s work because I sense that within her imagery, narration, and her use of the video medium, she uses and alters elements of our daily lives and physical experiences to communicate deeper meaning. In *dolefullhouse* (2007), “The Japanese artist did not begin working on the artwork with a preconceived idea but rather started by adding disparate elements to the animation that then formed meaning through their interactions. Tabaimo asks that viewers do not seek to understand her intentions behind *dolefullhouse* but instead create their own interpretations” (“dolefullhouse”). I think that there could be metaphor embedded in the meaning Tabaimo found through her own intuitive, responsive process of creating. As an artist who uses a similar process, I resonate with the idea that the work can be left, somewhat, to the viewer’s interpretation. Meaning in art exists in part in the unique connections formed through individual interpretations, just as meaning is formed through the responsive connections the artist made during the process of making.

## Events, the Human Hand, and Love as a Verb

I am interested in movement and action—the ways in which the physical properties of something affect the nature of its movements, and how an act can instill meaning into an object or moment in time. I believe these interests are why I pursue book arts. I have long enjoyed reading and appreciating books as objects but, upon being introduced to book arts, I was

especially drawn to the idea that a work of art is meant to be touched and even held. The artist book is most actualized when engaged by human hands.

I am also fascinated by the residue of actions. Like a forensic scientist examining a crime scene, I see certain aspects of the material world as evidence of an event having occurred. I am most drawn to the events caused by the human hand and human choices. When I lived in a town in Colorado, I remember passing the same marquees at gas stations and fast-food restaurants daily and noticing that the words often changed. On a rare occasion, I would see someone in the act of changing the marquee, and this thrilled me. I felt like I was witnessing a moment which was usually hidden, or elusive. I knew intellectually that when I saw the words had changed on the marquee, that a person had enacted that change. But it was so rare to witness the actual moment in time when the human hand was involved.

Recently, I have been noticing discarded clothing out on streets and sidewalks. Living in a densely populated city, and walking almost everywhere I need to go, I see many people and events playing out. However, I have never witnessed an action which led to a coat, pair of shoes, or an entire suitcase and its contents being strewn about on the sidewalk. When I pass by these objects, I see the residue of events, movements, actions, intentional human choices, and accidents. Discarded clothing, specifically, evokes a sense of vulnerability for me, especially when seen in a public domain. Clothing, in many ways, is a deeply personal reflection of our selves. It exists in direct connection with our skin and bodies.

In the private setting of the home, discarded clothing also intrigues me. I was inspired to make the photolithography print titled, *Discarded (1)*, after seeing my shorts and sandals had landed in a particular way after I had taken them off. The indication that the human body had been present there was so strong that I felt like my past self, which took off those shorts, still existed there, almost like a ghost.

Meera Mittal, *Discarded (1)* 2022



My interest with human actions intersects with my explorations of love. As I mentioned in the introduction, most of us grow up learning that love is a great mystery. False, sometimes harmful, expressions of “love” ensue, because as a society we do not live out our lives based upon a shared definition of it. I, too, recognize that my longings for love reflect the fact that I do not entirely know what it is.

One of bell hooks’ assertions is that we would benefit from thinking about love as a verb instead of a noun, as actions instead of only a feeling. Following hooks’ reference of M. Scott Peck’s definition of love, she quotes him again, “Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love” (4). While I believe this definition of love being realized through action is monumentally important, I still have a sense of love as a concept. There are, perhaps, multiple aspects to love: a grounded human level and an abstract spiritual level. Hooks’ addresses this distinction, too, and her definition of spiritual is, “the recognition within everyone that there is a place of mystery in our lives where forces that are beyond human desire or will alter circumstances and/or guide and direct us” (77). I resonate with this definition, and I feel that love and spirit are closely related or, perhaps, are one in the same.

In making my book *I Am Still Looking for Love*, I was thinking about the way that longing for love compels action. But I recognize that there is something elusive and unknown to me about

love. How could I imagine my life would be better with love in it, and act based on that assumption, if I do not even know what love is? I also think I am seeking to understand that more mysterious, spiritual side to love. The book became a reflection of this compulsion to seek out that which I do not understand but simultaneously imagine that I need.

*I Am Still Looking for Love* is made of handmade bleached abaca sheets of various levels of translucency with pulp paintings. Each page is torn diagonally from the top, spine-side corner down to the lower, opposite corner, roughly. Every page is a different shape, as the act of tearing is done simply with the hands without any system of measurement or guide. The pulp paintings are of the words “I am still looking for” in the typeface Constantia and are pigmented black. They are couched between two sheets of the abaca, containing them, and making them appear grey and removed. While still legible, the effect is like reading something on the other side of frosted glass. As the book is paged through, the words move through multiple iterations of being broken up, upside down, partially visible, smeared, faded, overlapped, bouncing around the page, and filling the entire space of the page. As I made the pulp paintings of the text, I thought about the numerous states of being and emotions I have experienced while seeking love. The different arrangements and sizes of the words reflect these various experiences. There are moments when the top layer of a sheet of abaca is torn away, and the stark black of the pulp painting pops out. There are words hidden in the gutter, and foldouts which make a word more legible when they are opened. There are groupings of blank pages, serving as moments of silence but areas which can still be explored. I tried to create an experience of searching by playing with legibility and offering moments for the reader to engage in curiosity and action.

The title of the book is also a part of the piece. The title contains the word “love,” but the text within the book seemingly does not. There are, in fact, several blank pages throughout the book which have the word “love” blind embossed onto them. If a reader looks closely, spends time



examining the pages, or returns to read the book multiple times, I believe they will find “love.” In hiding that word within the book, I am expressing the futility of seeking something which one does not know the definition of. Simultaneously, I have hope that love is something we can understand, define, be and do, and so it is there within the pages, waiting as a gratifying moment of discovery when a reader does find it. Finally, I tore the pages because tearing a material, or breaking it down in some way with my hands, is one way I explore, connect with, and learn about a material’s physicality. The act of tearing, for me, is also an act of searching, seeking understanding, and looking more deeply into something.

Meera Mittal, *I Am Still Looking for Love* 2022



Colophon



Hooks talks about the specific actions which are indicators of love, which are “care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication” (5). I like to think about what these actions are in detail and figure out what they require of us behaviorally. I believe several of them require awareness, of both self and others. And I think awareness is developed through being present with our senses and purposefully giving attention to the information those senses are communicating. For me, one of the behaviors all this translates to is observation. My second book *To See* addresses the topics of observation

and communication, both through its text and through the reader's interaction with the book structure and its contents.

*To See* is an offset printed pocket accordion with an integrated cover. On each page and the insides of the front and back covers is a pocket that holds an object for the viewer to pull out if they choose. The inside front cover holds an offset printed exposure of a photograph of a handwritten poem on crumpled, lined paper. The poem reads:

Why don't you and I  
    sit here  
                together  
with questions filling up  
our eyes  
                spilling into creases  
in our cheeks—

an endless afternoon  
                lit by  
                endless  
        setting suns,  
learning and  
loving.

The first page (and pocket) holds a piece of blue Hahnemuhle Ingres paper made into a Japanese letter fold, which the reader can open partially to reveal the first line of relief printed text, which reads, "To see me is to love me." The next pocket holds a small, brown envelope with a mailing label, which has the second line of inkjet printed text repeatedly overlapping itself, reading, "but seeing takes time." The sealed envelope contains a few seeds of an herb. There is no indication of the plant the seed would become. The next pocket holds a few pages of blank, lined paper, which are also offset printed exposures of photographs of the paper. The second of these lined pages has the next line of text printed towards the top, and reads, "seeing takes questions." The fourth pocket contains a trifold piece of paper with mirrored mylar showing through a circular cutout in the front. The back of the trifold reads, "often answers are unexpected, shifting in and out of

focus.” The last pocket on the inside of the back cover holds the colophon, which is also an offset printed exposure of a photograph of a handwritten colophon on lined paper. The entirety of the text in this book can only be seen when the reader chooses to engage in curiosity and explore. The imagery printed on the structure of the book comes from photographs of monotypes I made using torn strips of paper as additive and subtractive mark making tools. The trifold in the fourth pocket is also printed with imagery from one of my monotypes in which I ran many layers of crumpled phone book paper through the etching press. The resulting imagery is abstract but evokes physical qualities of paper. The scale of the shapes and textures zoom in and out from large and up close to smaller and further away, mirroring the action of psychologically examining and observing something from different points of view.

Meera Mittal, *To See* 2022



The choice to use paper as imagery came from my desire to bring a metaphoric material consideration to the work. I was uncertain how to evoke meaning within this book in its beginning stages, because I felt physically disconnected from the materials and process of offset printing. But by bringing in monotypes from a daily practice project, specifically ones which used the physicality of paper itself as both a mark-making tool and as the subject, I began to engage with the book. Enacting the daily practice project meant that I had to be present with myself for at least some amount of time every day, because my process in creating monotypes was intuitive

and immediate. Part of the intuitive aspect involved allowing myself to play with various tools and materials and respond to mark making in the moment. The prints which resulted were born from an intentional act of self-observation and connecting physically with process and materials. I would look at how materials behaved and interacted with the pressure of the etching press from the mindset of curiosity, a desire to learn through observation, and to see whatever my internal self and body knowledge wished to communicate that day. Furthermore, the origins of paper itself added significantly to the meaning of the book for me. Paper, as a material which was created to be a substrate for information, embodies the potential for communication, and evokes the human desire to express.

I look to Sarah Sze, again, as an artist who also thinks about the nature of observation in her art making. In some of Sze's installations, she is using spaces which are not designated for art to be displayed, and even more importantly, spaces which are not seen and occupied at all. Her piece *Untitled (Tokyo)* (2008) is an installation set up in the narrow space between a waist-high glass partition and a wall of windows at the Maison Hermes in Tokyo, Japan. In relation to this piece, Sze says, "I very much like the experience of viewing to be one of discovery, that you don't walk in and suddenly it's presented, and it's framed, and it says this is important, I'm art....[Y]our experience at first is, what is this?" ("Sarah Sze in 'Balance'"). Similarly, I am trying to get the viewer to participate in mindful observation and exploration with both of my artist books.

## Art Practice as Practicing Values

The final piece in my body of thesis work is the collection of monotypes which I created during a thirty-day, daily practice experiment. Being given the opportunity to create my own projects in the second year of the graduate program, I decided to challenge myself by making at least one monotype every day for thirty days. I had been interested in doing a daily practice for

some time and knew that making it an assignment would help hold me accountable to it.

Additionally, I see engaging in discipline, dedication, and devotion to my artistic practice as an act of love, in that I am giving time, care, and attention to this core part of myself and to the art communities I am a part of.

I have felt drawn to making monotypes since my first printmaking class—my favorite approach has always been to generate abstract imagery using intuitive mark making with various tools, combined with stencils and cut or torn pieces of paper which I use to create both negative and positive space. I delight in the way the pressure and action of the etching press make the final marks on the print and flatten all the materials on the plate to the same level. This flattening effect still fascinates me in the unique way it joins all marks and materials together. Monotypes, in my mind, are a pure example of the process of translation from the internal to the external, and the collaborative points of contact which affect the translation along the way.

When I first approached this project, I had an idea of its concept and how I would communicate that through the display of the prints. But later, I realized the project would shift as I was making the work, and that there was an opportunity to embrace openness. I decided to focus on the commitment to the act of a daily practice and later discover the meaning of the work.

I beveled a new plate for each print, thinking I might use the matrix itself as part of the piece. I observed my inner self at the start of each printing session, sensing how I was feeling and what I was thinking about. Then I would choose whatever colors, tools, and materials that arose in my mind, to make the print. I never made only one print from a plate but would alter the image and print the ghost with the alterations once, sometimes twice more. I posted pictures of the prints on my Instagram, as well. Later, I understood that this action was another way I looked

to others to hold me accountable. It was also a place of community in which I received encouragement and support throughout the process.

Meera Mittal, *Daily Practice* 2021



This project was a step for me towards practicing many of the beliefs and values which are embedded in love—observation, attention, thoughtfulness, mindfulness, care, contact with community and devotion. It was a practice in exploration, playfulness, noticing what changed, what came together, and what fell apart.

Throughout the graduate printmaking and book arts program, I have learned that the various aspects of life which seem separate can exist interconnectedly. Learning a wide range of processes, being encouraged to explore materials and mediums, I moved away from the limitations of compartmentalization and opened up to integration. By engaging deeply in learning, studio practice, and community, I have begun to experience the flow, richness, and endless opportunities for growth which arise from embracing an ever-changing existence.

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