

**Exhumation, Witness, and Reconciling: Reflecting on the Relationship Between Trees,
Landscape, and Sentiments of Home**

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Abstract

This paper explores the following research question; how can one utilize place based/nature inspired practices to create visual depictions of what feeling at home can be like and what it can become in the future. This is explored through my personal creative lineage and memory by discussing sense of place, personal connection to local forests and trees, as well as the interconnectedness of bees to the local ecosystem. Through the use of photography, cyanotype and textile mediums I explore the relationship between memory and the environment in sculptural installation and suspended photographic art works. My research references Canadian and international artists such as Kelly Richardson, Henrik Håkansson and Katie Paterson to draw upon the existing body of knowledge to support their research. This research was done to draw attention to the importance of small and large impacts of society on the local natural environment within British Columbia.

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Acknowledgements

I grew up in a forest. Living between the central Kootenays in Balfour and 150 Mile House in the Cariboo, the unceded and stolen traditional territories of the Sinixt, Ktunaxa, and T'exelc, of the Secwepmec nation (Nelson and District Chamber of Commerce & Williams Lake First Nation) I was always steps away from trees. I am currently living in T'kemlups, Secwepmec territory, in what is now known as Kamloops, British Columbia. It is an urbanized area on the unceded and traditional territories of the Secwepmec peoples, who have always been the stewards of this land. As a result of living in a city, I am more distant from trees. Trees and forests have always been way markers for me in creating artwork. I am of settler descent, from Germany, Russia, and England. I acknowledge and appreciate the natural environment of these lands, where I have had the privilege of residing for my whole life. I would also like to thank my professors, supervisor, and administrators of Emily Carr University of Art + Design for their support of the creation of this thesis research.

Introduction

As I have moved many times in my life, my personal idea of home has always been connected to the land and nature, rather than to cities and towns. Land and nature are equally important to my creative practice, and even from a young age, I preferred depicting and photographing abstracted forms in nature over realism. By focusing on formal visual elements (such as composition, pattern, line, tone, shape, texture etc.) I feel that my images are universal. However, they also capture specific locations that are meaningful within my own memories and past experiences. As the writer Lucy Lippard states,

[a]ll places exist somewhere between the inside and the outside views of them, the ways in which they compare to, and contrast with, other places. A sense of place is a virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary life and in traditional education fields” (Lippard, 33).

Lippard’s discussion of how one connects to place and home is apt in describing the thought that home can be more of an idea than physical place. That is, her insights about how one is “between the inside and outside views” of a place is an important framework that underpins my discussion (below), as it aptly tracks my relationship to nature and my desire to make art that not only mirrors an immersive and intimate lived experience, but also bonds me to the land and evokes the feeling of being “at home”. My thesis work investigated the inner connections of these sentiments of home through my relationship to trees and forests and my settler ancestors through creating and making artworks with textiles and photography, and my relationship to the local ecosystem through bees. I developed the methodology of “exhumation,” i.e. “unearthing” and “making from memory” (both mine and the memories of other family members), through research involving photography and discussions with my family.

I discuss my work in relation to the larger body of environmental artwork, specifically the works of artists such as Katie Paterson and Kelly Richardson. I also discuss using land for

orchards by settlers on unceded territories. I reference scholars such as Robin Wall Kimmerer and Leanne Betasamoske Simpson who inspired me to think anew about how one values nature and to reflect more critically on the role of cultivating trees in settler claim making. Both sides of my family had orchards, and although these settler orchards no longer exist, they continue to impact and influence memories within my family. However, the importance of these memories also feel dissonant when reconciling the orchards, as they were invasive trees occupying Indigenous land. These two conversations co-exist and underpin my relationship to the environment and begin with the dissection of my relationship with trees.

Methodology: Cyanotypes

My artwork comprises a mixed media approach using textiles and cyanotype, as well as working with found objects. Cyanotypes are my main photographic medium as I have a lot of formal training with many different types of analog photography. I wanted to use a photographic medium that contrasted textiles in a way that complemented the organic qualities of the fabric that I work with, in a similarly unconventional way. Textiles and fabric have a long history that is interwoven with cultures and identities of all people and societies. They also play a similar role within my art practice as referents to my family history. The way that I interact with textiles is similar to my relationship with photography, i.e. as a medium that is expressive of durations of time, of ancestral history, and memory. As photography is a form of drawing with light, it is not simply a single moment that is captured as an image, but it is also redolent of a preserved span of time. This matters to my overall interest in capturing sentiments of “home” within my art practice.

Also, during the completion of my Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2020-2022, I began developing a method of angling a mirror against the lens of the camera to obscure the horizon

line, creating a reflection of the sky or landscape back on itself. Mirror photography suits the subjects of memory and recall due to the distorted quality that the mirrors give the images. I began developing the method I used for mirror photography, to create canvases for my acrylic paintings. This method of photography also allows me to reflect trees and forests in the images to mimic a visual cross section of their root systems, through the reflections of the branches. As will be discussed later, the concept of a mother tree and its vital root system is essential to the messages embedded within *Exhumations*.

An important aspect of my methodology is also the notion of ‘exhumation’. Exhumation speaks to the act of unearthing an actual dead cherry tree but also, importantly, rooting out family histories and memories of places that are central to my artwork and my own personal sense of home. I will discuss this notion of exhumation as a method at length below.

The Significance of Trees

As mentioned above, my childhood was mostly spent in the forests of the Cariboo and Kootenay regions of British Columbia. Although I have always been drawn to incorporating nature in my work, until now I have never taken the time to analyze my need to incorporate certain natural elements. For example, over the past several years trees have been a central motif in my photographic work and mixed media paintings and this has continued for MFA research. I have narrowed the focus of my work to one specific Cherry tree, to explore the affinity of my own personal connection with nature. This has allowed me to gain a stronger connection and relationship to the natural environment and is significantly different from how I used to incorporate nature within my art practice.

For example, in the past my work focused on elements of my own mental health, but I expressed this by literally referencing the landscape (see Fig, 1)



Fig. 1: Reiswig M. *I'm Here Too*, 2022 (Component artwork) Mixed Media.

However, my relationship with the place where I live has changed over time to be less emblematic of my internal landscape —i.e., my “internal view” (Lippard, 33)— and more about my direct relationship with the flora and fauna of my home. My connection to the land is further developed through the discussion of the methodology of exhumation.

Context: Exhumation

Exhumation is both an artwork and a process of personal reflection on the act of exhuming a “body”. I will first explain the wider background to this artwork, then follow with a more detailed discussion, drawing out comparisons with other artists, projects and two works of literature.

In my earlier works (i.e., prior to commencing the MFA degree) trees were peripheral in my work rather than the focus. However, with the switch to trees as the focus of my work I have been increasingly interested in capturing the resiliency of nature. The work called *Exhumation* started by salvaging the branches of a dead cherry tree from my partner's yard, and photographing the entire surface of the tree. As the central focus of my thesis installation, I initially had wanted to use the entirety of the tree, including the root system flipped upside down and suspended from the ceiling of the gallery space. I had originally planned to do this to reflect compositional elements, similar to the aesthetics of my reflection photography (as described above), erasing where the roots disappeared into the ground, and to express the idea of resiliency. I then decided to create a replica of the Cherry tree instead, with a wireframe base of the same dimensions. From my photographs of the bark, I then made cyanotypes to cover the outside of the frame. My intention to replicate the cherry tree was to mimic a reflection of the orchards that had once been, recognizing that their loss was not an altogether bad thing due to their location on unceded territory, and by making way for local flora and fauna instead.



Fig. 2 Reiswig, M. *Reflection: Monte Lake*, 2025. Digital photography.

Resiliency is at the heart of *Exhumation* and this work was inspired by the example of the forests' regeneration that occurs after say, a wildfire. For example, there have been many fires in the interior of BC and even though devastating, it is notable that the ecology of regeneration is also at work and involves not just the trees but important insects such as bees.

Diane Dunaway, an apiary inspector and beekeeper at Soda Creek's Bee Happy Honey, north of Williams Lake, said last year [2017] was the first time in 20 years that she was without a surplus of honey. The bees refused to fly in the heavily smoky conditions so they ate through a portion of their food supply leaving the colonies short on nutrients for winter, she said. Dunaway estimates she suffered about an 80 percent loss of her colony last year, but the honey bees that survived are a hardy bunch with genes that are valuable to future generations (Dimoff, 2018).

The resiliency of the bees as a small, but integral part of an ecosystem had me consider the Cherry tree I was researching in a different way. In addition, the more research I did about root systems, I realized that representing the Cherry tree by extracting it and hanging it upside-down in a gallery was not only harmful to the ecology of the tree, but it was also disrespectful on my part. If I were to fully dig up the tree, I wouldn't just be disturbing the natural processes of decomposition of the tree, it would also disrupt the multitude of life present on, around, and below the tree. However, Suzanne Simard's work *Finding the Mother Tree* helped me to better understand the complexity of interdependencies between organisms through her discussion of the concept of a mother tree, as she says,

In connecting with all the trees of different ages, [the mother trees] can actually facilitate the growth of these understory seedlings...The seedlings will link into the network of the old trees and benefit from that huge uptake resource capacity. And the old trees would also pass a little bit of carbon and nutrients and water to the little seedlings, at crucial times in their lives, that actually help them survive (Simard, 2021).

In other words, there is a deep family relationship between individual trees in a forest and learning about how trees help each other to thrive was instrumental in forcing me to take responsibility for my own attitude and treatment of the Cherry tree, from seeing it as an artistic

material to one of a living being and part of a wider family. This shift –from seeing the tree as an object to one of a living being – also forced me to reconsider how I went about representing the tree. No longer could I uproot the Cherry tree put me on the path to creating a large body of work based on concepts of place and “home” in such a way that honored the tree.

Being “at home” in nature, both allegorically through the subject of a tree and directly through my physical engagement with the Cherry tree, has allowed me to consider the need to regard nature, and more specifically the Cherry tree that I have been learning from, as worthy of the respect I afford to the important people in my life. The research of Hubert Zapf has also helped me to see how flora and fauna are on par with human beings. He discusses “ecohumanism” and in his article, *Posthumanism or Ecohumanism? Environmental Studies in the Anthropocene*, Hubert Zapf describes ecohumanism in the following way,

[Ecohumanism] addresses the challenge for sustainable futures by the global ecological crisis and the derangement of traditional human scales of perception, time, space, and agency. [He states that this is done not] “simply [by] overcoming or reject[ing] an allegedly obsolete humanist past but rather the quest for a new, ecologically aware, and transculturally open humanism that is both critical of historical shortcomings yet can also profit from the rich proto-ecological archives of the humanist-literary tradition (Meireis and Rippl, 2019 Schaumann and Buchholz, 2021).” (Zapf, 5-6).

This definition of ecohumanism clarified for me why I felt that digging up the cherry tree was disrespectful, and helped solidify my intentions of creating art through the practice and guidance of the methodology of “exhumation”: creating artwork in a context that equalizes the respect that we afford to human bodies after death to plant life as well. In considering the cherry tree through an ecohumanist lense, it is equivalently vile to unearth the cherry tree from the ground as it would be to disturb a human corpse through exhumation. Through realizing nature as “a someone” rather than “a something”, my artwork *Exhumation* has come to mean more to me than simply unearthing a corpse, a living body in tree form. It is also an act of unearthing and

(re)learning how to be “at home”, which can be painful to do, and must be done with care and intention. The issue of how we not only perceive nature but also value it, and specifically, trees, is central to the evolution of my artwork. The following discussion will turn to the work of Kelly Richardson, who is similarly concerned with capturing the entanglement of personal sentiment with a commentary of colonial attitudes towards trees. The following will briefly explain Richardson’s project and then turn to a comparison with my own artwork *Exhumation*.

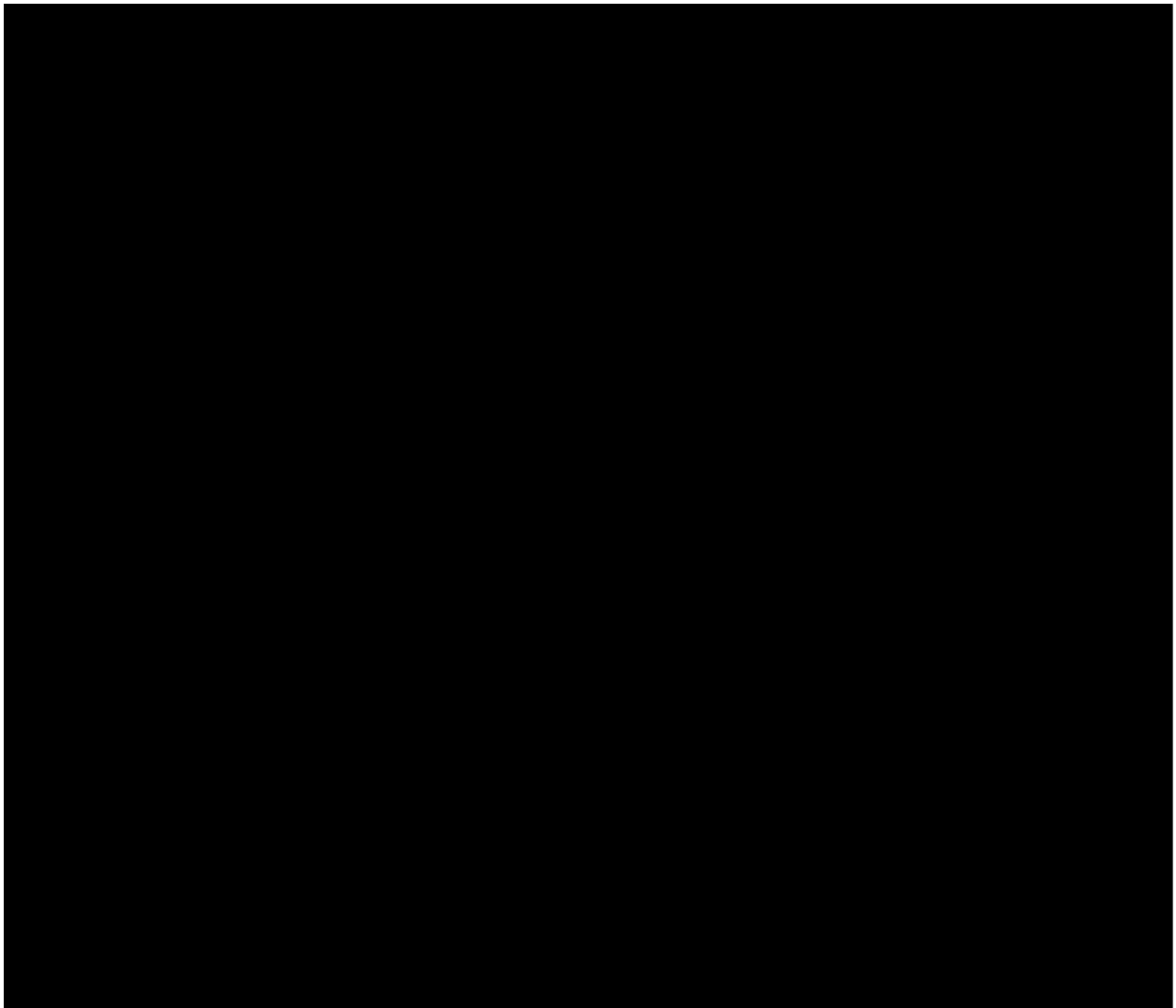


Fig. 3: Richardson K. Pillars of Dawn (I). 2019. 4K video installation with audio.

<https://kag.bc.ca/all-exhibitions/halcyon-fog>

Kelly Richardson's work *Pillars of Dawn*, a video installation, was part of the exhibition *Halcyon Fog*, shown at the Kamloops Art Gallery in 2022. In the exhibition notes for *Halcyon Fog*, the curator Charo Neville writes,

In this work each branch and the surrounding landscape is comprised of millions of individualized crystals, resembling diamonds. Upon closer observation, the images present a dystopic desert landscape where adverse environmental conditions have crystallized the terrain. One crystal in each of the *Pillars of Dawn* landscapes represents every species still alive today. In these fictitious landscapes, Richardson proposes a future reality where each species has been transformed into pure carbon. With diamonds being the most concentrated forms of pure carbon in the natural world as well as a signifier of wealth, Richardson asks us to again consider what we value. (Neville, 2022)

Pillars of Dawn (I) presents the viewer with a landscape where only diamonds remain, rather than the diversity of life that we currently have. People often would rather spend their money on diamonds, or other expensive equivalents, rather than maintaining the diversity of life; hence, there is a misplacement of value. For Richardson, by depicting crystals in the tree, denoting the number of species that are still alive presently, it harkens to the idea that nothing is stable in nature, and that without any actions taken to mitigate the impact of humans on the environment, the futures of those species are precarious. (Neville, 2022). By comparison, in *Exhumation*, my aim was to draw attention to the interdependencies among living bodies – human, tree, insect, etc. – by replicating the form of the one actual Cherry tree and literally copying its surface via sunlight and photosensitive paper.

Prior to engaging with *Pillars of Dawn (I)*, I had not considered the idea of combining my personal interests in landscape with narratives of apocalyptic environments and ideas of misplaced value. For example, most people see a dead tree as either firewood, or a form of waste or garbage meant to be discarded. When people cut down a tree, they often only use a portion of the tree and even the parts that are used, like pulp into paper, and wood for boards, are treated as

disposable items - as “garbage” - instead of the value they once held as precious and respected non-human beings. This shows that how a tree is valued is determined by one’s memories, culture, education, personal experiences, and perspective.

Tracing these differing perspectives and attitudes to trees in art and literature was key to my own troubling of how to approach working with the dead Cherry tree. An example of this that I found powerful was the science-fiction novel, *Roadside Picnic* (1972), by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. In their novel, they illustrate differing perspectives on what is “garbage”. In the story, humans are fascinated by remnants left behind by aliens. People study the detritus of the aliens with a scientific thoroughness, hypothesizing about the use of the artifacts. A black market emerges, thus illustrating the phenomenon of economic and cultural value systems. This occurs even though no one truly knows the original purpose and intentions of the materials. The question is asked whether or not the objects are a powerful technology, or simply the scraps — i.e., the “garbage” — left behind by aliens on their ‘roadside picnic’ as they travel on their way to somewhere else. The following passage captures these thematic tensions:

A picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. Cars drive off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios, and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see? Old spark plugs and old filters strewn around... Rags, burnt-out bulbs, and a monkey wrench left behind... And of course, the usual mess—apple cores, candy wrappers, charred remains of the campfire, cans, bottles, somebody’s handkerchief, somebody’s penknife, torn newspapers, coins, faded flowers picked in another meadow (Strugatsky, 1972).

There is an element of danger in sifting through the leftovers of an entity's ‘picnic’. This presents in the form of scientists attempting to control the danger they do not understand by restricting access to the areas where the alien detritus has been discovered, which in turn the technology is

(irresponsibly) sold in black markets, as humanity is often wont to do with things it does not understand. What is discardable to some is irreplaceable to others.

This novel also made me consider how different people consider the use of materials, and more importantly what our “garbage” is considered to be used for by other species on Earth. That is, how does the “garbage” of our own ‘roadside picnics’ interact with and impact other living beings on earth; animal, plant, and the ecological pockets newly formed through the myriad of entanglements of human and more-than-human encounters? Indeed how does a dead tree come to be seen as “garbage”. An answer may be found in the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. In this work Kimmerer notes that “trees act not as individuals, but somehow as a collective. Exactly how they do this, we don’t yet know. But what we see is the power of unity. What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together” (Kimmerer, 2013). The idea that individual trees are in fact, members of a group, that they are responsive to each other, “starving or feasting together” etc., (15), put me on a path to, again, rethink how to approach my dead Cherry tree.

Unearthing the Roots

In reconsidering my approach to the themes in my work, I also wanted to focus on addressing the historic planting of cherry orchards on stolen Indigenous lands. My grandparents' cherry orchard no longer exists due to urban development, but I continue to contend with the fact that it was planted on unceded territory. Planting orchards was a mode of making claims to the land for my ancestors and *Exhumation* is therefore an attempt to address this primal form of ownership. The dead Cherry trees I reference in *Exhumation* are shells of memories that are important while still reconciling with their existence as a part of these settler orchards and consequently the damage

they did to the land. In Eva Mackey's *Unsettled Expectations: Uncertainty, Land and Decolonization*, she asks, "[how did the vast lands of Canada and the U.S. come to be owned and controlled by colonial powers, and not the previously free and independent nations that lived here before 1492?]" (Mackey, 42).

The concept of ownership, and that the landscape of North America were seen as a blank slate (i.e. known as *terra nullius*) to be "developed" by settlers for personal and political gain is one that continues to shape attitudes to land. That Indigenous People have to fight for acknowledgment of their stewardship is another layer that I often reflect on within my art practice. It also informs *Exhumation*. That is, *Exhumation* is also a reflection of my own presence on stolen land and in the process of making the artwork, my desire to move forward to a future of shared responsibility takes on new resonances.

Mackey goes on to discuss say that "[o]ne of the reasons that the idea of land rights for Indigenous people is often responded to in contentious and even violent ways is that it disrupts unquestioned European assumptions about property, assumptions that have been developed through liberal political theory, social practice and law over centuries, and are based on a settled agricultural or commercial society." (Mackey, 43) This point about stewardship, and connections to the land and place, is also discussed in Leanne Betsamosoke Simpson's article, "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation." about stewardship and connection with land and place, and is also important to reference when investigating this topic. She shares a Nishnaabeg story about Kwezens, "little woman", tapping sap from a maple tree, where a young woman has "spent seven years immersed in a nest of Nishnaabeg intelligence. She understands the importance of observation and learning from our animal teachers, when she watches the squirrel so carefully and then mimics its actions" to tap the maple tree for sap.

(Simpson, 6) She also points out “Indigenous education is not Indigenous or education from within our intellectual traditions unless it comes through the land, unless it occurs in an Indigenous context using Indigenous processes” (Simpson, 9). While I can attempt to connect with the important trees in my life, I admit that there is dissonance between the invasively planted orchards of my ancestors, and the stolen lands they inhabited. I can connect with them over time, through memory, discussion, and records, but to be truly “engaged in land as pedagogy as a life practice [it] means coming face-to-face with settler colonial authority, surveillance and violence because, in practice, it places Indigenous bodies between settlers and their money” (Simpson 19). While I can celebrate the importance of the trees within my family's history and memory, I also continually remember and acknowledge that the orchards were acts of settlement and Indigenous dispossession, of appropriation and colonization. The act of researching my family history and relationship to orchards, and my own personal journey in rethinking my relationship to trees, forests and the land, was yet another form of exhumation. For these reasons, the inspiration for several of the tree elements in *Exhumation* reference family photographs and specific trees through time, and for me the installation holistically represents this internal exhumation.



Fig. 4: Reiswig, M. Planning photo for *Exhumation*, 2024. Digital photography.

As mentioned above, the beginning of the exhumation process started with my relationship to a Cherry tree. In this image of the cross-section (see Fig 4) I also had not noticed the cricket sitting on the side of the tree. Although the tree was dead there was still so much life existing on its surface. Digging up the tree and its root system had disturbed the lives of other beings that I did not notice or did not take the time to see. However, in my current approach to *Exhumation* – as an artwork and an action— I now understand that this is an act of unearthing ideas and thoughts left otherwise unnoticed. It was appropriate then to use cyanotype to execute this work as not all the details of the original object (the tree and its life forms) carry forward to the finished cyanotype, and often smaller details like the cricket, are blurred and faded. The cyanotypes operate not only as metaphors for “not seeing” but also, you need to look longer at a cyanotype

image than a digital photograph – to scrutinize it carefully –for your mind to fill in the logical details and placement of information. This act of scrutiny is similar to what happens to a memory when it is recalled; each time some of the details and information of a memory fade and distort.

In summary, the process of creating *Exhumation* transitioned as my understanding and vision for the artwork framed (and reframed) my comprehension of what the act of exhuming could be. Through spending time with the tree, photographing the bark, and then noticing details of life overlooked, it affected my decision to dig up the whole tree to create the pair of sculptures shown in the final version of *Exhumation*. Through reflecting on the insights of Simard, Wall Kimmerer, and Richardson, and their respect for the lives of all non-human beings, my methodology of exhumation began to take on new meaning. That is, the aim of creating the replica sculptures was to evoke the memory of the tree rather than its physical and metaphorical body being placed within the gallery space.

The display of *Exhumation* for my final thesis show incorporated 20-30 ponderosa pine saplings. They were installed in the exhibition space, buried in soil and mulch, to give the impression that they were growing in the ground. I chose ponderosa pine as they are a tree species indigenous to the Northwest. They were situated in intervals around the sculptures (replicas of trees). The pattern of mulch connecting the saplings to the sculptures simulated the concept of roots connecting a mother tree to saplings. There were some saplings that did not survive the installation process as well as others, and these saplings were placed further from the sculptural mother trees, symbolizing the severing of knowledge given from the mother tree to the sapling. This is much like the breakdown of sharing intergenerational knowledge and memory, for future generations to learn from and preserve. The intention was to bring these saplings into conversation, so to speak, with the sculptures as witnesses to a celebration of life, rather than of

death. Inspired by the concept of a mother tree, the central cherry trees, although “uprooted”, act as a nurturing figure of the ponderosa pine saplings. After the exhibition, the saplings were offered to members of my cohort, family and friends. They were asked to plant the trees with care and thoughtfulness, and to see the saplings as a contribution to the rebirth and growth as a form of reclamation. There are ten groups of 3 trees, each set symbolizing one member of my cohort. This number was chosen to represent the idea of community creation, or creative evocation of home, during the program. Additionally, each group of trees had three trees within each set, representing the community of each person, their own interconnected web of support and knowledge.

Alongside creating *Exhumation*, I worked with the branches that had been cut off the cherry tree and incorporated them into a series discussed later called *Fragmented Hive* (which I will discuss further below). This was done to further explore the relationship between the tree as a *body* and *home* for other forms of life; specifically the relationships between trees, bees, and the urban environments within which I reside. However, the following will outline how my sentiments of “home” relate to my art practice.

Memory - A Lineage of Making

Some of my earliest memories are of creating. I have a distinct memory of working on a small cross stitch of a black cat drinking from a bowl of milk. My interest in visual art and being creative extends to things learned from family’s hobbies. My mother has a long-standing sewing and textiles practice, while also being interested in other forms of art. Hobbies are therefore deeply entangled in my family history. Despite this, I have always struggled with reconciling my interest and experience in craft with my activities in fine art. My other interests in hobby and craft extend to the idea of the process of learning a new craft, and how the crafter needs to see

the beauty in not only mastering a craft, but also the results of learning as well. In the early phases of my research for the MFA program, I came across this quote by Hannah Höch;

[e]mbroidery is very closely related to painting...[i]t is an art and ought to be treated like one even if thousands upon thousands of sweet female hands - displaying scant skill, no taste or colour sense, and not a hint of inspiration - 'mis'handle quantities of good materials as foolishly as possible and call the results 'embroidery' (Höch, 72).

I had always associated her work with the political collages that are celebrated today as visual acts of resistance. I knew little of her embroidery beyond it being the day's work that supported her artistic practice (Hirschl Orley, 2024), and did not identify that these artworks could mean the same thing. I was therefore inspired to consider the idea of 'process as the artwork itself' in a new way, which gave me new insight into how I could consider craft and textiles as part of *Exhumation*.

Elissa Auther's *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* introduced me to the idea that "[a]part from associations of weaving with hobbyism or women's work, fiber gained new visibility...in the 1960s and 1970s outside the high art world in a variety of other social and artistic contexts and practices that fostered the revivals of the traditional crafts of hand-weaving, quilting, embroidery, dyeing, knotting, and basketry" (Auther, 25). Textiles are a powerful medium for conveying organic form and figural qualities. This allows the versatility of delving into its possibilities as a heritage based medium (i.e., as a medium for capturing my own heritage and familial connection to fiber arts). Equally, an appreciation of textiles can be seen in exhibitions like *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* where the curators "showcased 50 international, intergenerational artists using textiles to communicate vital ideas about power, resistance and survival. From intimate hand-crafted pieces to monumental sculptural installations, these works offered narratives of violence, imperialism and exclusion alongside stories of resilience, love and hope" (Barbican, 2024). Another significant exhibition

that demonstrates the historical contribution to contemporary art practices is *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*. This exhibition “challenges long-held notions of the weave as a function of textile alone, exploring the many forms both warp and weft have taken when explored by abstract artists over the past 100 years” (MoMA, 2025).

As discussed above, the emphasis of my work now is to identify and express my relationship with my local environment through trees, forests, and bees, and to continue developing themes of “home” through visual expression, but to also do this by using various textiles and processes. Textiles are malleable material, able to be cut, torn, dyed, molded and transformed. There is also the possibility of layering textiles to capture translucent qualities that evoke ideas of memory and personal histories. Similar qualities are captured in the artwork below (as seen in Fig 5).



Fig. 5: Reiswig, M. *The Workers' Dance*, 2023-4. Dyed cotton and cotton thread.

The process of physically learning a new skill is an important recurrent interest in my artwork. I have a background as a high school art teacher in the British Columbian educational

system and part of my philosophy as an educator is emphasizing the value of the learning process over the end goal. I confronted this personally when I began working on cyanotypes and textiles sculptures to create the trees in *Exhumation* (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Reiswig, M. *Exhumation*, 2025. Mixed Media.



Fig. 7: Reiswig, M. Surface detail of *Exhumation*, 2025. Mixed Media.



Fig. 8: Reiswig, M. Surface detail of *Exhumation*, 2025. Mixed Media.

Sculpture is a new field of inquiry for me. Working in three dimensions is a challenge. It became an interesting access point for me to incorporate other mediums I am more familiar with, like photography and textiles. For example, I attached tea dyed fabric onto a wire frame that was created to the scale of the cherry tree. This became a meditative process of the exhumation of the memory of the tree, whom I spent time with. While I was working on this sculpture from my memory of the tree in the studio (fig. 6), the tree was simultaneously decomposing in the yard. This creative process of deconstructing my own creative methods, to immerse myself in relearning a new skill, was important for getting across my ideas of “home” with the use of textiles.

The Significance of “Home”: Context

An important source of inspiration for my work was a research trip to southern Alberta. It provided me with new insights into my family history. It was a form of familial memory exhumation. I took this research trip accompanied by my mother, to photograph and create work focused on my grandfather’s family history. Not only did the route we traveled included locations that had been important in my family’s history, but also, I was able to trace and map new memories of different moments in my family history. Learning more, by traveling to and through some of the places referenced in family stories, visiting grave sites in the town where my grandfather grew up, tracing individual buildings, or sites of former buildings, that he would have visited, and writing about my family was a way of weaving together thoughts, ideas, and influences in the development of my own creative process. For me these locations had only existed in stories, so physically standing in the places my grandfather may have stood literally and figuratively grounded the stories for me.

From this experience, I developed a body of artworks. *Unearthed* (Fig. 7) is a cyanotype on fabric of the town of Bellevue, Alberta. I took the picture while looking at buildings referenced in family histories. *Sky* (Fig. 8) and *Self* (Fig. 9) were internal acts of rumination on the research that I had done on my family lineage. Each artwork also involved the repetitive act of stitching and was a way to capture the process and pattern of learning. Stitching is also a meditative practice and while working on *Unearthed* I was transported through time, reflecting on the lives of my family members and the places that they inhabited – places I would never know in the same way that they had.



Fig. 9: Reiswig, M. *Unearthed*, 2023. Cyanotype, acrylic ink, cotton embroidery thread on unbleached cotton.



Fig. 10: Reiswig, M. *Sky*, 2023. Natural plant dye, dyed fabric, cotton embroidery thread on unbleached cotton.

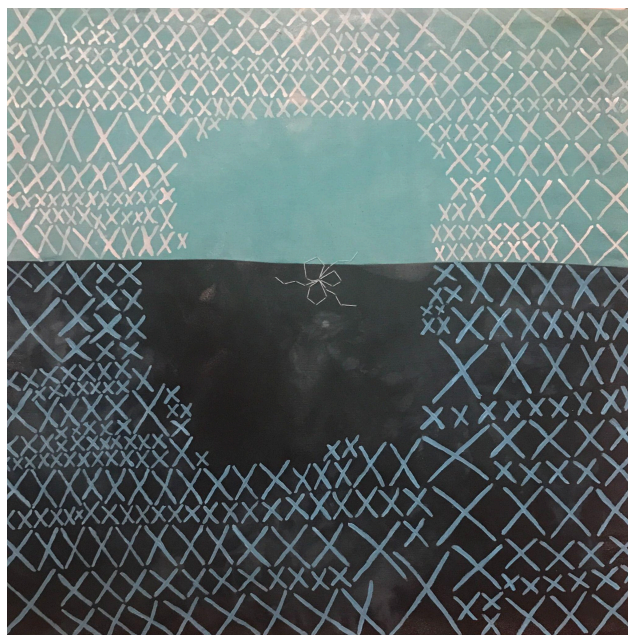


Fig. 10: Reiswig, M. *Self*, 2023. Acrylic ink and paint, dyed fabric, cotton embroidery thread on unbleached cotton.

The Significance of Bees: Context

While working with the branches of the cherry tree and textile material for *Exhumation*. I was drawn to the shape of a hexagon through its connection to bees and the storage of honey. The act of sewing, and working with the hexagon, resonated with the themes in my practice; a sense of place (home), family memory, and deep ecological time (via trees and forests). My work has always been centered on the natural spaces where I live. In urban environments, it is sometimes difficult to have a connection to nature. Although I grew up in a rural setting, most of my adult life has been spent living in urban settings. As a result, it is important to me to connect with and focus on the natural spaces I have lived in as an anchor for my work, so that I and my work can convey the feeling of being “at home”.

Equally, for me, bees are symbolic of the resiliency of nature and the impacts of humanity on my environment, and as such, my aim was to capture this symbolism of their resiliency in my work. For example, in my artworks called the *Fragmented Hives* series (fig. 10 and 11), I again used cyanotypes, but hexagonal mirrors serve as both evocations of hives and bees, and are suspended from the bones (branches) of a tree they once pollinated. I used cyanotypes of a local forest, devastated by a fire in recent years. I made the cyanotypes in winter to further a feeling of isolation and endings. My aim was to provoke the viewer, to remind them of the importance of a forest, but also to be aware of one’s use of environmental resources, consumption, and the daily damage we do to the environment. Harkening back to the work Richardson’s *Pillars of Dawn*, it’s important to remember that the existence of a species is fragile. All life is as precious as it is precarious, and should be treated with care, and protected through fostering resiliency. The bees are a good example of this; at a precipice of existing, but persevering nonetheless.

Within my practice, it is also important to me to reflect on resiliency in my local community, as there has been so much ecological devastation here over the past two decades. Some of this resiliency has become evident in efforts made by the City of Kamloops as well as citizens of the city when Kamloops was named British Columbia's first Bee City.

The City of Kamloops mission statement, "Making Kamloops Shine" would not be possible without the help of our pollinator friends. Pollinators are vital to a healthy and resilient ecosystem. The conservation of pollinators is critical to the sustainability of Kamloops' natural areas and urban gardens. Certain pollinator species have been determined to be in decline due to habitat loss, climate change, pesticide use, and disease/pests. A diverse and resilient pollinator community is a key component of a sustainable city for us all. (Bee City Canada, 2025)

While bees are pollinators, and need plants to survive, so do the trees that they pollinate, which are also a primary home for their hives.

The presence and importance of bees in our environment is easily overlooked by humanity but not being mindful, on a daily basis, is also a form of intentional ignorance. This often brings me back to work that has always inspired me to action through my practice. My practice of confronting species loss by comparing it to fading and forgotten forms of craft, forces the viewer to consider what aspects of one's own life serves as forms of intentional ignorance. I draw inspiration for this type of mindful work in practice from works of fiction that serve a similar purpose for their readers. One short story that has highlighted the concept of intentional ignorance the most for me has been "Those Who Walk Away from Omelas" by Ursula K Leguin. It is a short story about a city of eternal happiness where people seemingly have no cares or troubles. However, upon reaching an age of adulthood, one learns that all the sadness of the city is given to one child, so that everyone else in the city can be eternally happy. As an adult one must collude in sustaining the child's eternal sadness in order to be able to then continue one's own happiness. As Leguin writes, "To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in

Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed” (Leguin, 335). So people choose to leave the city rather than live with the awareness that their happiness is at the expense of a child’s unending sadness. I see in this story a wider parallel: this sadness is similar to how our forests, trees, and natural environment are like the child living in the city of Omelas: feeling and expressing the pain at the expense of every responsible adult on earth. We are aware of the harm we are causing, however for eternal happiness, humanity is willing to pay the cost. With regard to my own work, in the *Fragmented Hive* series, my aim was to position viewers as a citizen of Omelas, and to confront the moral challenge of one’s willful ignorance.

My intention of the viewing experience was such that I wanted the viewer to enter the space of *Exhumation* coming first upon the dying saplings, their mulch roots, severed from the mother tree sculpture in the centre of the work. Then, as the viewer moves further through the installation, they encounter healthier saplings, in close proximity to the central mother tree sculptures. This is meant to represent that the closer that one is to their community, their memories, and their heritage, the more metaphorically grounded. They are in a successful and healthy present, through the nurturing of their own community, or “mother tree” system.

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNJG77zJrn0/?igsh=azliMW9tbnhsanpm>

Fig. 12: Reiswig, M. *Fragmented Hive I*. 2025. Mixed media. Video documentation.

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNJGzljJY2t/?igsh=M29ubHYwZnkwOXR3>

Fig. 13: Reiswig, M. *Exhumation*. 2025. Mixed media. Video documentation.

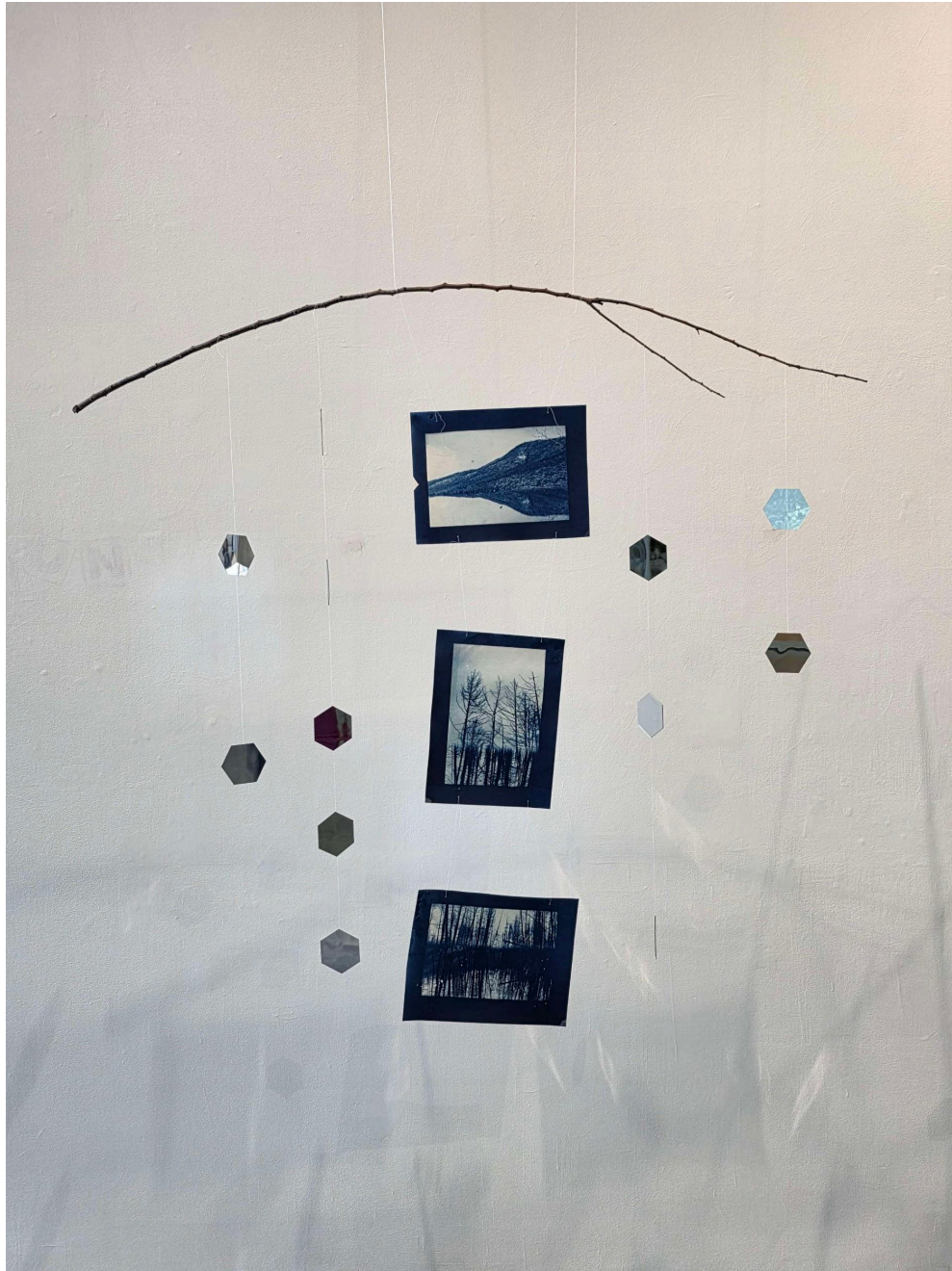


Fig. 13: Reiswig, M. *Fragmented Hive 2*. 2025. Mixed media.



Fig. 14: Reiswig, M. *Fragmented Hive 3*. 2025. Mixed media.

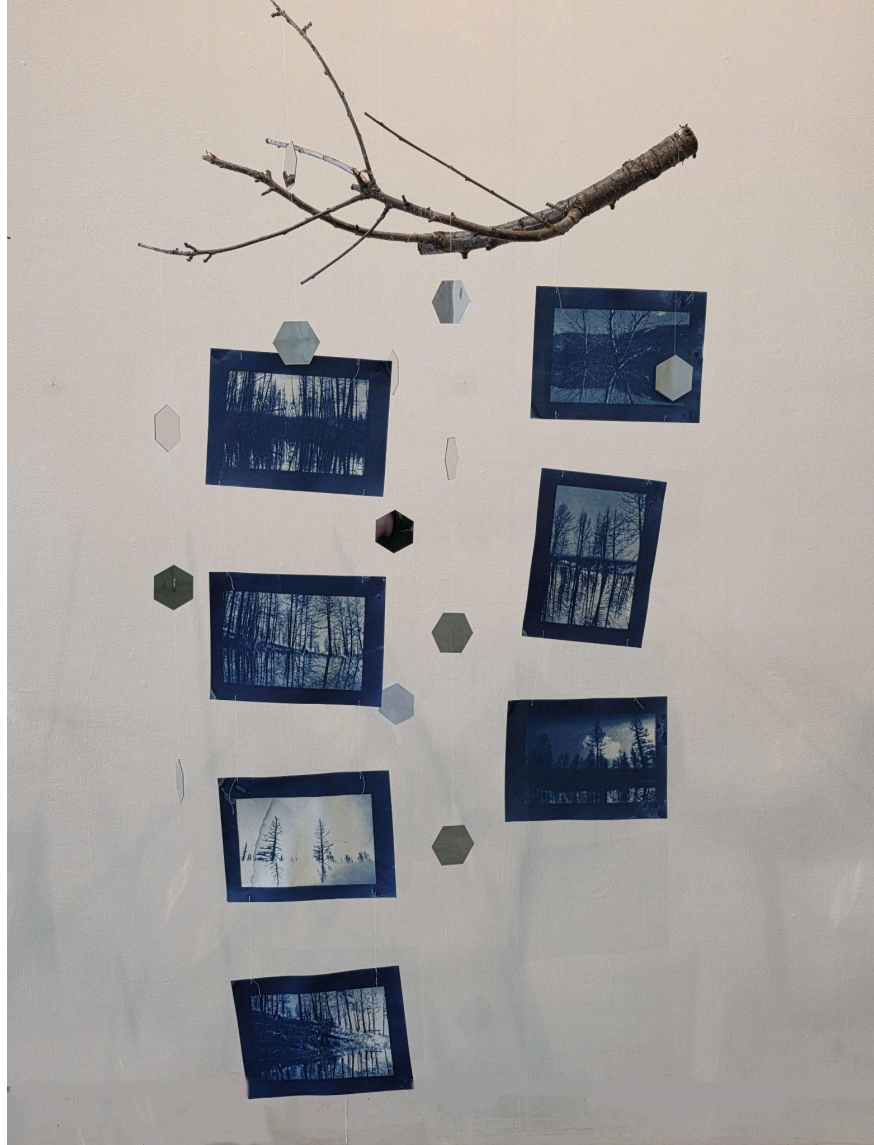


Fig. 15: Reiswig, M. *Fragmented Hive 4*. 2025. Mixed media.

This lesson also applies to me. To begin addressing my own intentional ignorance I have been looking at my consumption recently, both in my creative and artistic practice, and my activities of daily living. One of the most memorable things I have ever bought second hand was a bag of fabric squares. They were all different, and placing them on a table, one could see that all the different scraps were remnants of other projects. However, each piece was treated with care. They were carefully cut, sewn, ironed, before being donated. This act of being careful is

something that I continue to strive for as a methodology. In a sense, my methodology is also a form of making anew. As Wall Kimmerer states;

In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out. (Kimmerer, 2013)

I have a responsibility to the give and take of living in balance, and to continue to listen when being asked to learn.

Exhumation & Return: Summary

During the process of creating *Exhumation* and the *Fragmented Hive* series, I have found ways to talk about my aesthetic connection to the land. My interest in learning about the land has also deepened from reading Indigenous scholars, such as Simpson and Wall Kimmerer. They have helped me to consider my own layered history and responsibility to the land through the process of making art.

My original plan for *Exhumation* was to display cut, burned, trees in the installation rather than the saplings. However while working on the piece, I realized that I needed to source the trees ethically, so I researched places to do so, and asked many questions about where and how this could be done. Eventually I acquired a firewood permit for dead and fallen trees from the Ministry of Forests. I also had conversations with my professors, peers, and family about the ethics of using these trees in the installation, as the central cherry tree would be missing due to my considering it a respectful act not to use the literal tree in the work. This led me to consider that *Exhumation* could be considered a ‘celebration of life’ rather than an end of one.

I also had many conversations with family while working on *Exhumation*. By photographing, and researching, as well as working with remnants of the tree, I was reminded of the familial connection I have specifically to cherry trees. My maternal grandfather had a cherry orchard while my mother was growing up. When I asked my mother for a reference photo to use in *Exhumation*, she told me that every year her family would take photos in the orchard, and that as she grew up she could witness her growth and development alongside that of the orchard. I am still sitting with and learning about my own relationship to a place that I only briefly remember from my childhood. I am continually affected by the physicality of a place, even when those places have changed beyond recognition. In Suzanne Simard's work *Finding the Mother Tree*, she references her own personal lineage and connection to landscape and specific forests. Simard's research has helped me to understand my own personal relationship to landscape and specific trees.

I counted the rings, marking each decade with a pencil—the tree was a couple hundred years old. Over twice the number of years my family had lived in these forests. How had the trees weathered the changing cycles of growth and dormancy, and how did this compare to the joys and hardships my family had endured in a fraction of the time?....These trees persisted through climatic upheavals, suffocating competition, and ravaging fire, insect, or wind disruptions, far eclipsing the colonialism, world wars, and the dozen or so prime ministers my family had lived through. They were ancestors to my ancestors. (Simard, 2021)

I have been intrigued by the notion of trees being personal ancestors. With regard to the specific cherry tree that I have been working with, I have a connection to this tree the way Simard speaks about the forest. I felt the same way during the fire in Kamloops in 2021, on the last night of the heat dome, with the temperature at its hottest. I had heard stories from others about what it felt like to see a golden-red glow on the edge of the hilltop near your home. The suspended cherry

tree referenced in *Exhumation* stands as a visual metaphor of my own relationship to climate change and a deep sense of mourning.

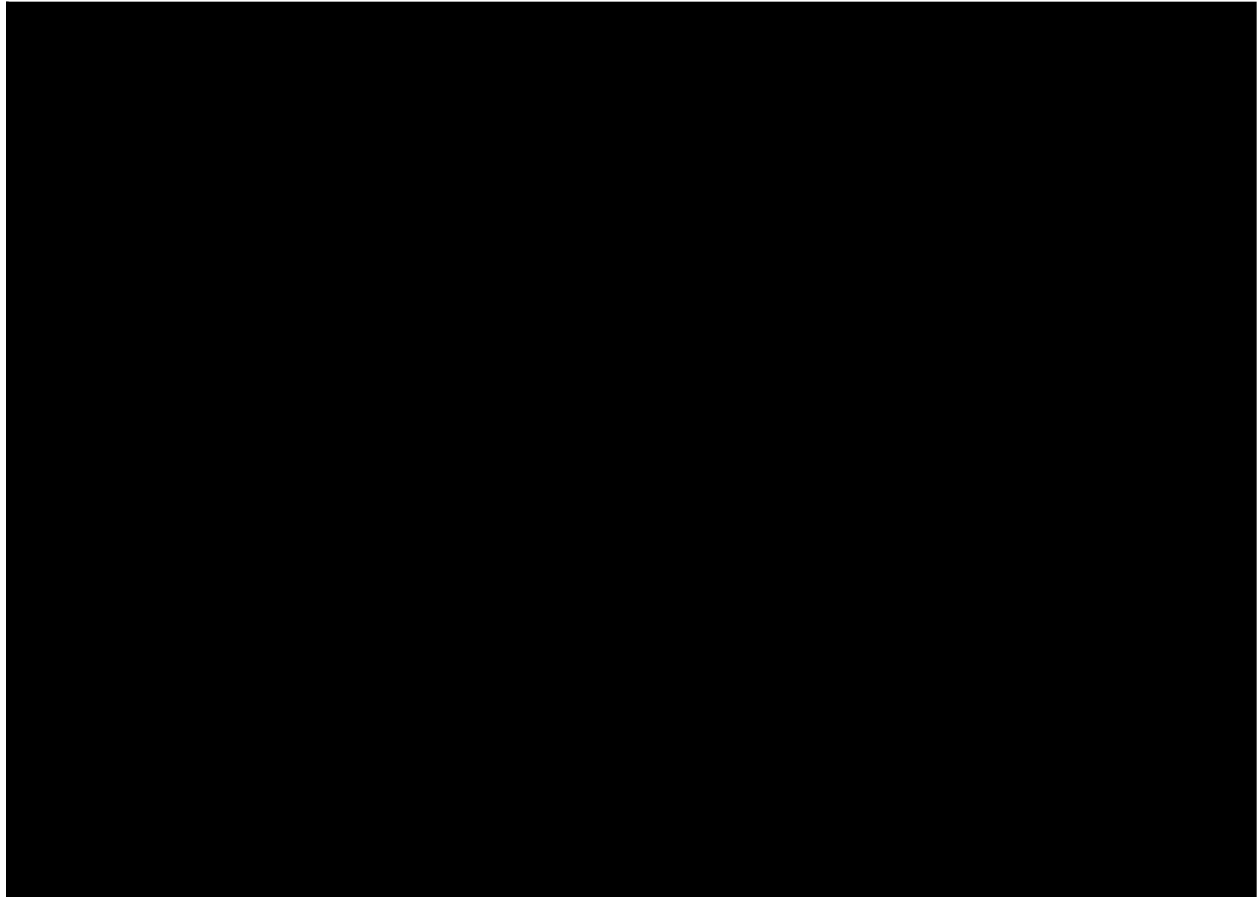


Fig. 16: Håkansson, H. *Installation View of a Tree (Suspended)*. 2016.
<https://www.berlinartlink.com/2016/07/22/nature-meditating-on-scientific-constructs-an-interview-with-henrik-ha%CC%8Akansson/>

Works like Henrik Håkansson's *Installation View of a Tree (Suspended)* considers a collective mourning for specific elements of nature. When asked in an interview, Håkansson described his relationship to nature as;

I live within what is described as our natural world, a giant pattern of fragmented environments that create my living situation. I try to connect to the outdoors and to other animals, a bird or a bee. Observing moments, trying to understand or to reflect the patterns that generate an eventual expression or what this communication is all about. For me, it's all based on a personal experience in reaction to political situations and ever-changing fashion and developments within society. (Bardos, 2016)

Preservation and Release

Although my early plans for *Exhumation* incorporated the use of trees that had died in the fires of the past few years, I ended up wanting to stage *Exhumation* as a ‘celebration of life’ rather than a funeral. I wanted to inspire the hope that I still see in the landscape regenerating; that in the seasons that follow a fire the burned trees look like brushstrokes of soot on an otherwise green hillside.

In her work *Future Library*, the artist Katie Paterson also considers the concept of celebrating the purpose of a forest to communicate change to and for the future.

One thousand trees have been planted in Normarka...just outside of Oslo, which will supply the paper for a special anthology of books to be printed in one hundred years’ time. Between now and then, one writer every year will contribute a text, with the writings held in trust, unpublished, until the year 2114. (Future Library, 2014-2114).

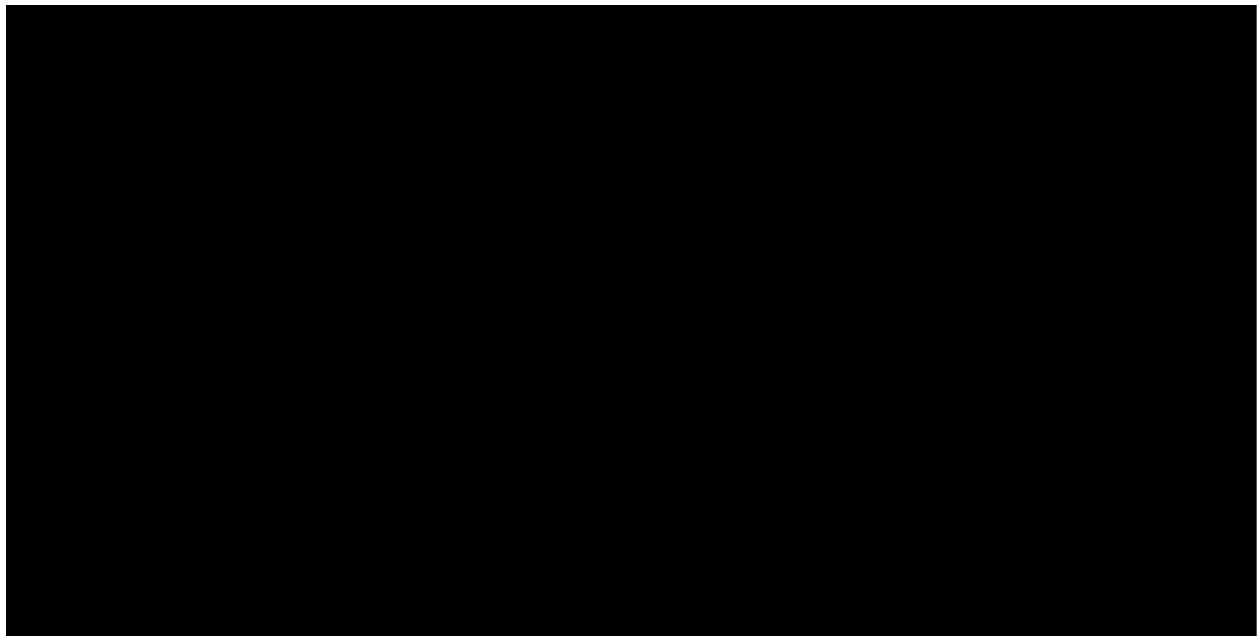


Fig. 17: Paterson, K. *Future Library*. 2014-2114. Normarka.
<https://www.futurelibrary.no/#/the-artwork>

Future Library informed many aspects of *Exhumation*, as it considers a confrontation with the devastation of the present, while looking to the possibility of healing in the future.

Future library has nature, the environment at its core — and involves ecology, the interconnectedness of things, those living now and still to come. It questions the present tendency to think in short bursts of time, making decisions only for us living now. The timescale is one hundred years, not vast in cosmic terms. However, in many ways the human timescale of one hundred years is more confronting. It is beyond many of our current lifespans, but close enough to come face to face with it, to comprehend and relativise. (Paterson, 2014-2114)

Exhumation asks the viewer to participate as a witness to harms done, confronting one's own actions, and one's own relationship with nature, both in one's own memory and in the present. However, the consequences of actions *not taken* are also an aspect of *Exhumation*, as informed by works such as Maya Lin's *Ghost Forest*.

In nature, a ghost forest is the evidence of a dead woodland that was once vibrant. Atlantic white cedar populations on the East Coast are endangered by past logging practices and threats from climate change, including extreme weather events that yield salt water intrusion, wind events, and fire. The trees in *Ghost Forest* were all slated to be cleared as part of regeneration efforts in the fragile ecosystem of the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. (Madison Square Park, 2021)

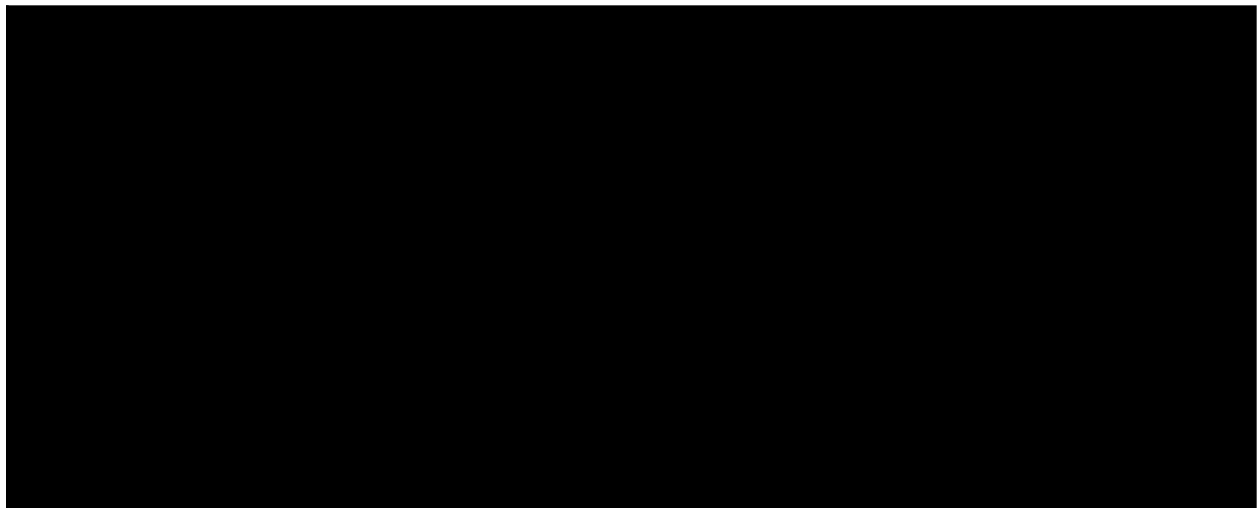


Fig. 18: Lin, M. *Ghost Forest*. May 10-November 14, 2021. Madison Square Park.
<https://madisonsquarepark.org/art/exhibitions/maya-lin-ghost-forest/>

Akin to the sapling trees in *Exhumation*, the trees in *Ghost Forest* stand as witnesses to inaction. Although the sapling trees in *Exhumation*, and the fragments of the cherry trees in *Fragmented Hive* have been removed from their natural environment, they are also relics that remind the viewer that they are standing in what was once part of a forest, something that was alive, and this allows the viewer to reflect on their own action and inaction in relation to the natural world.

Conclusion

Throughout my research, I investigated the ways in which my artistic practice, grounded in place and relationships with the land, challenges one's actions in relation to one's local environment. I did this by developing a body of work that examined my relationship to a specific cherry tree, and then troubled that relationship through the methodology of exhumation: i.e. an unearthing and evaluating my own memories, familial history and lineage. My material research (use of textiles, sewing, etc.) also prompted me to reflect on the role that my family's hobbies have played in influencing my aesthetic sensibility, and my connection with the land, place, and the making of "home". This was done to explore the research question: how can one utilize place-based, nature inspired, practices to create visual depictions of what feeling at home can be like and what it can become in the future.

Throughout the MFA program I have also learned about ways to begin reconciling my family's settler experiences and memories of place with my experiences of current environmental disasters. I have also found productive ways to move forward through my art practice and will continue to combine photographic techniques and textile materials to create mixed media installation work that explores themes of memory and a sense of place. Creativity and connection to one another and the land is the way in which I can begin to move toward healing, while

continually acknowledging a connection to a collective past. While my research adds to the body of ecohumanist artwork, it does so in ways that are limited by the specificity in which they were created: focused on my own personal relationship to a specific tree, lineage of making, and learning, to (re)consider nature as a multitude of interconnected autonomous, living beings. In the future I plan to broaden this inquiry, while still considering a local audience as participants, and to develop collaborations with local artists and First Nations peoples, to broaden the scope and impact of the research.

I need to again acknowledge and thank the T'kemlups te Secwepmec people. This land, now known as Kamloops, is where I have had the privilege and honour of living, creating, and working. These privileges have come at a great cost to the Secwepmec people, living as I do on their stolen land. As a settler I will never fully be able to connect to or completely grasp a connection to the land. However, the only reason that I am able to create and research in such an unbelievably beautiful place is because of the continued land stewardship of the Secwepmec people.

Reflection

Preparing for and participating in the exhibition was both challenging and rewarding. I was unable to attend the full month of the residency, and went back and forth between Kamloops and Vancouver during the installation, exhibition, and deinstallation process. Due to these circumstances, I was very thoughtful in the ways in which I prepared for the installation process, booking appointments with the very helpful Emily Carr installation technicians. I had a very clear idea of how I wanted the installation process to work, and how the final installation would look.

After the completion of the installation, the general feedback I received was that some of the visual decisions turned out in a way that was unexpected by those who had read drafts of this thesis supporting paper. This was an insight that was helpful to the further editing of this paper, and in preparation for the thesis defence presentation. I was able to consider how I articulated and communicated both visual decisions and meaning in regards to *Fragmented Hives I-IV* and *Exhumation*. During the thesis defence, I received further feedback in this regard, that I was able to orally communicate aesthetic compositional decisions about the meaning of these artworks, but these aspects of the thesis were less clear in the thesis support paper. This was the main focus of my edits, in addition to careful selection and editing of my documentation. The documentation is vitally important to the continued life of *Fragmented Hives I-IV* and *Exhumation*, due to the nature of the ways in which they were installed: they will be difficult to reinstall given future opportunity in a similar way. Overall, I am satisfied with my edits, and am proud of the accomplishment of having participated in the thesis exhibition, and the opportunity to reflect on the experience in a thorough manner.

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