

Thesis: a curated nature

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a curated nature questions our ongoing habit of the human race in relation to the rest of the world during the anthropocene. There has been a deep disconnect between humans and our evident ties to nature due to capitalism and the need to live, work, and strive independently. We have lost touch of the rich culture and ways of living from old civilizations like Native Americans and Egyptians, where nature and animals were not only respected but worshiped. Ever since the advances of technology, agriculture, and globalization we have lost touch with where our things and food come from and what it takes for all these things to come into play. We are living in a world of instant gratification where you can order anything you want with a touch of a finger. It is now possible to go to the grocery store and eat fruits and vegetables from all around the world and produce livestock that is fully grown in months. But what we have lost touch with is the soil that these fruits and vegetables come from or all the hands that touch the package you ordered online. Life is becoming all too convenient but it comes with a severe cost, the cost of healthy working ecosystems that were working fine before humans, but now need our hand to reverse the impacts we have made. Through the study of *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennet and *Wild Blue Media* by Melody Jue, I aim to raise questions on what hand we have in a larger system, in conjunction with my own work.

As an artist with an environmental agenda, I aim to sever the barrier and disconnect between human and environment due to our anthropocentric culture. By creating symbiotic cycles and activating the senses I recreate a simulation where I as the artist have a hand in the

functions and curation of an environment and my involvement is not pernicious, but instrumental to the overall cycle of this man-made landscape. *A curated nature* is not an observation, but a speculation of kinetic energy and relationships amongst life, macro and micro. I explore the ecology of human and non-human relationships through the study of growing organisms, flowing water, and the juxtaposition between natural and industrial materials. These elements become collaborators producing new events and encounters and in result, a continuous orchestra of art takes root.



The tank in the center echoes the surrounding environment, giving the spectator an invitation to relate and empathize with the organism, in this case fish. Through this shift in perspective we can recognize these fish as other centers of experience. We then question our own existence within the room that acts as a tank and challenges the relationship and connection we

have beyond the glass. The tank is not just the centerpiece but an aquaponic system. This is a symbiotic cycle where the fish produce waste that is pumped up into a media bed where the plants take nutrition from the waste and the bacteria and plants clean the water that is pumped back into the fish tank. The artist hand is also pertinent to the cycle where they regulate and create the system, diminishing a hierarchy where all components are important for the upkeep of the total cycle. A system is most generally defined as a grouping of elements subject to a common plan and purpose. These elements or components interact so as to arrive at a joint goal. To separate the elements would be to destroy the system.¹ The tank acts as a milieu-specific analysis (a person's social environment) coined by Melody Jue in *Wild Blue Media*, calling attention to the differences between perceptual environments and how we think within and through them as embodied observers.² "Milieu-specific theory" is about attending to the conditions of interpretation that are possible within specific milieu, or habitats, or environments.³ Jue states, "Thus, instead of seeing the ocean as a decodable structure that determines thought, we can think of it as a dynamic milieu whose characteristics manifest by actively moving within it (as a human, octopus, plankton, or other) and through mediated forms of contact."⁴ In this case the fish tank acts as an alternate milieu of buoyant water compared to the grounding gravity the gallery encompasses. What kind of language can we take from the milieu underwater? A part of a symbiotic cycle?

Arranged in a semicircle are five large terracotta sculptures surrounding the aquaponic tank. Each sculpture is placed on industrial materials of cement blocks and bricks where the terracotta structure and the industrial material act as one large pedestal for chia to grow from. I

1 Haacke and Siegal, extracts from interview in Arts Magazine. Vol. 45, no. 7

2 Jue, M (Feb., 2020). *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Sea Water*: 14

3 Jue, M (Feb., 2020). *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Sea Water*: 17

4 Jue, M (Feb., 2020). *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Sea Water*: 25

wanted these pieces elevated. My idea was to make a base that was physical - you understood how it worked, how it went to the grown that you were standing on yourself, and how it's there to lift these pieces up to a certain position where you can project into them. The dimensions of these pieces are important, the heights range from 8 to 9 feet tall, much larger than the average human, giving the chia an elevated surface to grow on. This elevation challenges the perspective of the spectator. Forcing the spectator to look at the growing organism vertically questioning our embedded culture to perceive our surroundings as hierarchical. What happens when chia sprouts meet the eye of the spectator? When you have something that's either your scale or larger, you're in conversation with it. The shadows then come into that play. How do they change from early morning all the way until late at night?

The use of Terracotta as a material is not to be overlooked. Through various mediums, each artist has spent time controlling materials and environments to remind us, the viewers, that materials and environments can't really be controlled - that chaos rules, and things can crumble - and depending on how we honor this truth, it may bring us great worry or great freedom. Takming Chuang, an artist working with raw clay explains, "He has further developed his sculptural vocabulary with unfired clay. Realizing that preservation is a tactic to fend off (or perpetuate) anxieties associated with change, he tightly wraps the unfired forms in plastic to prolong their wet and malleable state. As a result of these protective efforts, the objects remain ironically unstable. Within their polyethylene sheath, the natural process of change endures: the

clay shrinks and hardens, forming wrinkles and blisters on the surface.’’⁵



I use ceramic materials for their inherent 'naturalness'. Blurring the line between natural and artificial, they act as effective mediators between nature and culture. My treatment of them allows us to contemplate the idea of a natural landscape on a small, even intimate scale. I want to explore our doubtful experience within nature by intensifying the attraction and sense of alienation simultaneously. The use of water for the growth of the chia are juxtaposed with permanent transformations by fire in the kiln-fired ceramic pieces, manifesting the disconnected temporalities of water and fire through clay.

Through this journey of creating I have learned as an artist to let the materials speak to me. In this case letting the clay take over, allowing it to do what clay naturally wants to do, which is to squish, bend, break, curve in and out, collapse, creating structures that naturally emanate our own bodies. Clay has a memory. It is evident in these structures, and it also responds back to you. You develop a dialogue with this material as you continue working with it,

⁵ Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, Summer Residency, Ephemeralty in Clay, Newcastle, ME

working with it rather than forcing yourself onto it. Things embody their own time. They are accumulations of time, each inflection of form and material articulating a distinct moment. Our bodies are no different. Our age appears in our skin, the smoothness of our face and hands hardening into furrows and scars to reveal our intimate histories. Taking inspiration from Jue, my aim was to work through the matter rather than dominating it. Linda Swanson a ceramicist working with raw and fired clay who does an exceptional job alluding to interests grounded in the metamorphic nature of ceramic materials and processes. Swanson elaborates, “Clay is not just a natural source that we are so connected to, but I believe that we're all sort of connected to it through our DNA. We're part of this material. So it lends itself not only to working with it, but it's also a very natural extension of oneself, and organic objects tend to come about or find shape through this material.”⁶



The industrial materials used within the installation from plywood, cement blocks, bricks, and glass are used to prop up and elevate the systems and structures in place. The aged surface of

⁶ “Rooted in Soil at the De Paul Art Museum” C Studiomosaic. March 15. Web

the cement and bricks gives a nod to the realities that industrial ‘technologies’ and ‘nature’ are one in the same, only technology is man-made. Yet one could argue that the vegetables and herbs in the aquaponic system are so far removed from the original plant and genetically modified that it could also be considered man-made. The industrial materials act as a placeholder for the human hand. A metaphor for how we can use our ‘technologies’ to uplift systems small and large. We can repair our perspective on how to see nature as a subject to be a part of rather than to dominate by addressing our environmental impact and current toxic relationship we have with it. We have mastered how to utilize all the materials and resources this Earth can offer creating amazing leaps of human evolution in society, but what we left behind is the deep rooted connection we have with nature. Rather realizing we are the same water, bacteria, and matter. I aim to understand the construction and layout of the natural world in relation to how we construct our own by utilizing the natural materials and resources nature provides. The cities that we create are a reflection of our culture, creating cement jungles and ecosystems using cement, bricks, and wood, which can be watered down to water, rock, and trees. This disconnect between our man-made landscapes to the natural world has caused a “us” vs “them” complex, where nature is separate to us, when in reality it is our makeup found all through our DNA. I want to dissect the various systems and cycles that we are a part of, from the macro systems like the galaxy and the rotation of the sun to the micro environments of our DNA and the bacteria that keeps all living things functioning. Through the understanding and assessments of these cycles we can place ourselves within them becoming less estranged to our natural roots with nature. How can we look at materials, resources, infrastructure and break them down to their most basic functions to dirt and rock?

By focusing on ecocentrism due to anthropocene and how it has impacted our culture or the lack of culture in nature. How can we bring back this understanding of connectedness, not only with nature, but amongst ourselves? Studying systems and theories where humans are not the center of all things and challenging a world where we live fluidly with the elements and organisms, rethinking a life where we create symbiotic relationships. To challenge the mindset of dominance, superiority and entitlement that is embedded in our culture. What is our hand in the curation of nature and what happens when we set it up to be successful on its own, where nature is the artist and humans are the curators? And how does this manifest into our society in relationship with nature? Through the analysis with nature and hyperobjects I will decontextualize a perspective and new relationship on how we can mend our disconnect with the world.

When and how do we decide the importance of something? This comes to mind when thinking about capitalism's effects on consumptive behavior. The rate things are produced along with the realities of junking them for newer things diminishes the object's status. Being materialistic is to appreciate an object for what it is, for being old, used, broken, fixed, or turned into something new. Jane Bennett claims the word "thing-power": "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, and to produce dramatic and subtle effects."⁷ I apply Bennetts reasoning behind the power of things and humans and how all coincide as matter through systems and kinetic energy. To start looking at the world less as a hierarchy and more horizontally, we need to consider what perspective we are observing the world from. Objects are the way things appear to the subject. The status of an object becomes a 'thing' when we become aware of it.¹ This awareness of surroundings is termed by Jane Bennett as "thing-power"⁸.

⁷ Bennett, J (Jun., 2004). The Force of Things: Steps towards an Ecology of Matter: 350

⁸ Bennett, J (Jun., 2004). The Force of Things: Steps towards an Ecology of Matter: 348

Objects go through different states of being when trashed, cherished, animated, or inanimate. To decide whether an object is deemed worthless is to denounce its existence. When we are tired of something we had valued, it ends up discarded or in a landfill. That object may have been thrown away, but its existence does not end, instead its state of being is degraded.² There is a closeness between human and non-human. Humans are built with an assemblage of materiality, a collection of minerals that is matter. The minerals that make up our bones and flesh are the same minerals that make up; the Earth, the animals that occupy it, the resources to make our things, and even the air we breathe. I am not denying the differences between humans and objects, but a perspective where humans are not the center of existence. Humans are complex animals with a conscious, intellect, and “rational soul”³ But this does not deny our make up of matter connecting us back to our roots as walking and talking minerals. With this perspective we can understand and appreciate our surroundings and the things that occupy it and walk through life with the awareness of our impact and the energy that we consume and transmit into the world.⁹

Ecology is the study of the place that we live.¹⁰ The understanding of where we come from has everything to do with where we live, how we live, and what actions take place in our environment. The natural flow of matter is to spread energy, make connections, join forces, and create networks¹¹. This assemblage of matter can be atoms coming together to create a cell, cells coming together to create a being, trees connecting through roots to create a forest, or humans gathering together to create communities. Thing power and ecological thinking points out the connection of all things. This connection is affected with the destruction of human action due to

⁹ Bennett, J (Jun., 2004). *The Force of Things: Steps towards an Ecology of Matter*: 348

¹⁰ Bennett, J (Jun., 2004). *The Force of Things: Steps towards an Ecology of Matter*: 348-49

¹¹ Bennett, J (Jun., 2004). *The Force of Things: Steps towards an Ecology of Matter*: 350

reckless measures in regards to other things. Through my art I want to show the value of our surroundings as 'living things' by giving these 'things' a narrative, history, and context to point out the symbiotic relationship we can have with all matter.

We have curated our own realities where only when we want to include nature is when it is welcome. Creating our own scenarios for convenience without looking at the devastating impacts they produce. When we acknowledge our anthropocentric culture we can use it to curate an environment where we are a part of nature rather than amongst it.

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