

blooming pestiferousness

By

Jessica L. Belangee

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Painting & Drawing Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Chairperson: Tanya Hartman

Norman Akers

David Brackett

Date Defended: March 19, 2019

The thesis committee for Jessica Belangee certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

blooming pestiferousness

Chairperson: Tanya Hartman

Date Approved: May 7, 2019

Abstract:

blooming pestiferousness is an exhibition that discusses found organic object in tandem with both the physical body and hidden psyche. The exhibition consists of nine large-scale drawings and three smaller supplemental works. Each work is sensuous and ephemeral, alluding to the hidden mechanisms of the subconscious mind and intrusive thought. Spotlighting each, I intend for the viewer to become intimate with each work allowing for the detail and nuanced mark making to emerge slowly. Drawn flora and fungi, invented *anomalies*, and *abyssal space* support each of these elements within the exhibition.

Acknowledgments:

To My Thesis Committee Members: Norman Akers, David Brackett, and Tanya Hartman whose kind patience and fruitful guidance has lead to an overflow of emotion. I will never forget how much consideration was given to me in this momentous journey of graduate school. To Shantel Wright for being a wondrous exhibition partner and great friend, our show was successfully complimentary. To my encouraging partner, Dennis Englert, who has supported me consistently and aided in keeping me functional. To Aaron Paden for fantastic photography that reflected my work perfectly. I appreciate all of the caring individuals who contemplated and aided with the installation of my Thesis Exhibition. In addition, my family and friends who have lent me their strength and intuition in times of need.

Thank you all

Table of Contents:

Chapter I: *Defining Ideas & Past Circumstances*1

Chapter II: *Cultivating Nature*.....3

Chapter III: *Irrational Reality of Things: Process*7

Chapter VI: *Progress of Healing & The Truth*.....16

Works Cited19

Chapter I: *Defining Ideas & Past Circumstances*

My process emerges from the land. There is resonance in meditation within the landscape; melding myself within foliage, soil, and water. During times of strife, I often find myself beckoned into the wild, as wild as one can get in common times. Recognizing how impactful the resonance of nature is, I allow it both physically and metaphorically to change me for the sake of experimentation and growth.

Observing how the land develops benefits the act of *seeing*- the shadows crawl quickly, vibrancy of light changes, and the wind suddenly pounces. These developments of seeing how infinite the world is lead me to landscape painting. It is an introspective and arduous journey. Painting something so cherished yet so vast was something with much more nuance than I previously imagined.

Contemplation amongst the landscape allowed for a more dedicated reading of space and natural form, which translated into more experimentation in the studio. Metaphor was born from analysis of depth, color experimentation, collage, and layering techniques. Trial and error became a large contributor and I have decided it is quite crucial to my practice. The manic craze of overworking was lunacy I often felt. Physical material stood in for emotion, all bundled upon the surface. Removing and erasing was the metaphor for the intrusive thoughts that torment me.

The temptation of materials grasped me - I could not drive myself away from the glistening oil paint. Maddening delight was the tune of these early works that eagerly took advantage of my obliviousness of intuition. "*When is it done?*" was a consistent singsong utterance while I beat paintings to death, deaf to the meandering.

The sketchbook I carried documented the battle of overworking. It seemed imperative for these private studies to grow outside of an intimate place. I felt secure in between worn pages and agency was given to these small observational and imaginative studies. “Agency is influenced by people’s individual (material, human, social and psychological) and collective (voice, organization, representation and identity) assists and capabilities.”¹ This, in turn, empowered my choices and prepared for the unknown outcome of this once-private venture.

¹ *Ibrahim & Alkire (2007) Empowerment & Agency :12*

Chapter II: *Cultivating Nature*

Evolving from observation in the sketchbook, poetic meaning became relatable in my studio practice. There began to be a melding between personal ideologies and creation where in the past there was no such discretion. Afraid of assertion, the isolation of the deep woods kept beckoning me during these processes. It became a kind of addiction, a substitution for words and action. Abram writes: “In the absence of any written analogue to speech, the sensible, natural environment remains the primary visual counterpart of spoken utterance, the visible accompaniment of all spoken meaning. The land, in other words, is the sensible site or matrix wherein meaning occurs and proliferates”²

How my own body interfered with the natural environment was increasing in clarity. The natural world is still a brief withdrawal from obligation, self, and torment. How did it begin to change how I digested bitterness? Intrinsic details of the landscape captured my attention almost always, even since my first gallivants across rural fields. Fascinations quickly changed into collections, facilitating the landscape with my curiosity of the benign. Plucking and plundering small fragments was another meditative process.

This practice certainly felt like more than just a game of finding things, it was a deeper connectivity to self-reflection and memory. “It peels off like skin from a molting snake. Of course, to forget the past is to lose the sense of loss that is also memory of an absent richness and a set of clues to navigate the present by; the art is not one of forgetting but letting go.”³ When *taking*, I unconsciously started to *give* myself to the landscape, telling my secrets and worries

² Abram (1996) *Spell of the Sensuous*: 140-141

³ Solnit (2005) *Field Guide to Getting Lost*: 23

until they were whisked along with the wind. Previous experience of how my body was molded by trauma was let go within the landscape as I committed myself to small treasures.

Allowing the collections to merge with my creative practice invited intuition, seeing, and agency into my routine. Making connections with the natural objects created a kind of cause and effect. The collections began with the harvesting of flowering plants both invasive and extrusive, there were no qualms about what kind. They stirred emotion within, a sudden vulnerability. “The problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong. Precarity is a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others. In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent”.⁴

Eventually the form of the mushroom opened the possibility of more dialogue between my body and land. Keeping my sights glued to soggy stumps and the fringes of forest became ritualistic for my practice. Each individual was differently gnarled, spongy, funky, and lumpy - the more the better. All of the collected forms are harvested at differing times during the year. These initially did start as practice in my sketchbook but were teased out into the chaotic paintings I once overworked.

It is not right to say these objects have gender, but I want to reflect how these fungi and flora are represented as sexual organs of their species. All of the fruiting bodies collected are in accordance with the reproduction of their own species, which to me is not a defined gender. The significance of the vulvular flower and phallic fungus is interchangeable but still of importance in reference to the human body.

⁴ Tsing (2015) *Mushroom at the End of the World*:29



Collections: Found Mushrooms

I want to interpret my interest further, in context of the natural world inside of the idea of the Anthropocene. There is a dynamic amount of information pertaining to the landscape such as diversity, multi-species relations, agriculture, and continual system collapse⁵. I will not refuse to acknowledge our reality that takes place, nor do I wish to downplay its effects caused by capitalism. Multispecies well-being is full of compromise and to say I am a passive participant would be a lie. Allowing myself to submerge in the present is to acknowledge the complex past histories of colonization, genocide, extinction, deforestation, and suffering. Abiding by the laws of nature while letting the influence of land mingle in thoughts is imperative.

⁵ Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*: 100

It is not a passive agreement. I harvest specimens from the land but not without compensation. In return, I try to resuscitate elements within the natural world such as composting, caring for wildlife, and planting various pollinator plants. Haraways' words are embedded in my thoughts: "How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned?"⁶

⁶ Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*: 35

Chapter III: *Irrational Reality of Things: Process*

Not unlike the fragile collected forms, the beginnings of this development began as a limited size and of limited palette. These experiments manifested as altered paintings through the lens of monotype. Painting through the methods of printmaking allowed for layers between foreground, background, and subject. Clarity and color provided a greater framework for the subject material.

The diminished scale related to the private sketchbook while the direct application onto the substrate was reminiscent of freeform drawing. Flat color in combination with intensive line work lead to depth in the shallow picture plane. A dull, hazy luminosity emerged from ambiguous color that fell between form and atmosphere, living in a small liminal space. Introducing low levels of value combined with open white space improved the impact of small drawings. Line and mark-making became a large component to these small works, as I wanted the drawn objects to exude fleshiness. The tension of the surface was not heavily reliant on physical material but a complexity of mark, value, and contrast.

Gauzy layers that diminished line was crucial and working on paper seemed to be the next logical conclusion for the series. Continual serendipity of mark and translucency sustained engagement between viewers and work. This excited me, since sustained drawing was usually a prototype for many different media and before now, not an end in itself. The act of drawing is like a flow of energy that pours from your limbs.

I embed elements that all unfurl at varying speeds between the translucent and opaque layers, which creates visibly intriguing forms. More modest elements within the work waver between memory and thought, just a whisper of a mark that insinuates vulnerability. Each

organic object, ranging from turnip greens to found fungus, goes through different rendering developments. Still-life combined with imagined combinations, undergo a transformation between real and figment- they are dubbed *anomalies*.



Detail: Wandering in the Garden

Sensuality is important to the work. Each curve and ripple is inescapable and referential to the internal (psyche) and external (physical) body. When discussing the body, I wanted to assign importance to David Abrams life-world: “The life-world is the world of our immediately lived experience, *as* we live it, prior to all our thoughts about it.” Which continues on to discuss: “Easily overlooked, this primordial world is always already there when we begin to reflect or

philosophize. It is not a private, but a collective, dimension- the common field of our lives with which ours are entwined.”⁷ The “lived-experience” can also be metaphor for the physical human body before mental health wears our endurance down.



die and be born again, only quicker this time

The work that was birthed from my thesis exploration continued its dialogue for our physical selves. Fungi and flora are very reminiscent compared to our bodies. The interchangeability between our function, texture, and community are moderately related. These large drawings started with a structure that is referential to the supportive system of both fungi

⁷ Abram (1996) *Spell of the Sensuous* :40

and plants. Roots and mycelium are both foundations of the fruiting bodies that emerge to reproduce. These systems are reminiscent of our own nervous system and filaments of blood vessels, each carrying vital substance within the body. They crawl and undulate, these sprawling tendrils are foundational but also can be smothering and obstructing. Nature is not inert, just as our bodies are always in flux. We are consistently modifying ourselves to fit into the natural world.

In my practice, I have begun to find and implement organic pigments and dyes. The use of these organic pigments was generated by the lack of thick oil color. I needed to enforce layers of pigment in washes such as coffee, beet juice, and mushroom ink. This byproduct of ink cap mushrooms was a warm gray and very faint, the smell of fungus was pungent and earthy. Using these translucent layers in tandem with mark making generated physical form and atmospheric space, layers are abundant.

Paying homage to these winding tendrils of body and flora, I begin the structure of these drawings with more found items: gnarled driftwood and pieces of cracked tree bark. Contorted and structural, these branch forms writhe within the piece, a placeholder for structure and balance. Found objects drawn from life and *anomalies* are juxtaposed in and around the skeleton-like structure. Numerous marks make up the value and complexity of the roots, allowing for the viewer to see their intensity. Brief smatterings of hair exist as well, small little moments that draw the viewer in. *Anomalies* are ever present; these hybrid creations are reconstructed into uneasily familiar amalgams. I wanted to instill a feeling of confusion with the fabricated objects; they seem quite real yet slightly off-kilter.

The allure of overworking in the past has imparted understanding of dedicated open space. Purposeful white negative space sprawls in and around the figures, always present. The

term used is: *abyssal space*- something that I hope causes some unease. The feeling of dread permeates as I continue to work, embracing this apprehension of blank space. *Abyssal space* is an overwhelming blanket that references lack of emotion and the act of disassociation. The thick cloud of emptiness is comparable to an amniotic sack for the drawn elements.



this is not a poem for a dream

The absence varies between each drawing, but it is certainly a symbolic metaphor for the whole series. Blending layers, the root structures fade in and out as they are obscured with watery gesso. *familiar old tug from behind your eyes* has an obvious push and pull between foreground and background as the materiality argues with each other. The brambles are of more

heft in relation to the ephemeral fungus. There is reference to the body between the drawn and painted objects: a barricading skeleton lurking behind a tangle of folding skin.



familiar old tug from behind your eyes

I want to insist on the relevance of medical illustration and botanical field illustration in context to my work. These types of studies are highly inspirational for my current and past

works. The academic informational drawings are curated like maps, documenting each form with detailed precision. Both types of illustration have a way of breaking down the components of imagery. They are carefully descriptive; each element is plotted down without fuss. The composition has simple characteristics compared to the meticulous illustrations, a blank space comparable to *abyssal space*.



a dull ache recognized as familiarity

Pink bulbous forms are both *anomaly* and body in some cases, a warped sense of parasitic entity. There are many sinewy trails between branch, tendril, found object, and body that I want to draw attention to. Seeping, tethering, and encircling, these intrusions are found within each drawing. Transgression of memory, self-destruction, and warped decision-making are all afflictions that affect the body and psyche. “Loss of control, of ourselves and of our planet”⁸ is something not entirely stoppable. Showing the balance between layers, chaos, plant, and body is of importance as it begins to illustrate how we cannot control our own subconscious nor the landscape as a whole.

⁸ *Ackerman (2001) Cultivating Delight :8*



almost relishing the feverish embrace

Chapter VI: *Progress of Healing & The Truth*

Being vulnerable and battling the stigma of mental illness is a hard task and a lifelong journey that can be documented by both intrusion and intuition. Monumental versus the ephemeral, as my work insinuates, can be a metaphor for the translation of body to mind. Macro versus micro can be another metaphor; the body being visible while turmoil is hidden deeper inside the folds of the mind. Coming to accept my vulnerability is still an ongoing chaotic battle but exploring agency and empowerment in spaces that do not offer power has begun to shift my perspective.

The theory of *Radical Softness*, a series and concept dubbed by Lora Mathis, resonates within my philosophy. Never being able to ‘cure’ yourself of mental illness supports the decision to embrace and empower- accepting the emotional body and self. I have always been emotional but I have not accepted it. Our society openly shames female-presenting and femme individuals for expressing too openly, consistently dubbed either “too dramatic” or “uncontrollable” or in a “rage”. This inane situation catapults the thought of difference being irrational and weak, lesser beings that divulge too much in emotion.

As personal as my work is, I hope it reaches extensively to others who battle with layers of mental health and emotional openness. So many individuals battle with themselves for justification of their own bodies and emotion. Since this is an ongoing conversation within various communities, I hope to reach further outside of my privilege as well, wrestling with the deconstruction of privilege. As a cis-passing white individual, I don’t want these ideas to be only dominated by a certain demographic, just as mental illness pervades every form of living.



tendrils continue to leak, even if you are already cold

Healing and accepting your humanness is an honest endeavor, a validation of self in this cruel society. Plentiful setbacks interrupt healing, just like ripping out the stitches of an open wound. Healing could be a recollection of voice, as Mathis infers: “Softness is embracing my voice. It is regaining it after trauma. It allows me to work past shame (although, god, I have so much), and to be comfortable and accepting of myself. I have always been soft, emotional, and sensitive. But I have not always accepted it.”⁹ Even if we beat our inner monologues down, it is ok to experience pain and suffering without disguising it as something else. Tearing my emotional self open and letting the agency of those thoughts dictate myself, my work, my body, my queerness, my suffering – it’s a basis of intuition that has guided me through the landscape and drawing. The internal agreement that airs on the side of empowerment replicates the very same softness of my work and mind.

Still interpreting *Radical Softness*, or radical acceptance of difference, I will continue creating autobiographical theory as a form of understanding intrusive subconscious and irrational consciousness. The acceptance of truth is first and foremost cold. I may never understand or love myself but coming to accept how I despise myself allowed for transgressive empowerment all on its own. It may not be healthy nor am I settling on this stark acceptance, but I want to allow for growth within the context of self-loathing.

My future may begin to discuss how one can begin to triumph over their self-hatred, not by beginning to love themselves, but accepting and willing to understand *why* there is so much disgust. By then, the cooperation to *survive* may drift to the surface, a moment of satisfaction in life. Perhaps one day the ever-frightening aspect of self-understanding will be coaxed into my work and practice.

⁹ Mathis (2016) *Embracing Radical Softness: An Interview with Poet and Artist Lora Mathis*

Works Cited

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human-World*. Vintage Books: Penguin Random House LLC, 1997

Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses*. Vintage Books Edition, 1995

Ackerman, Diane. *Cultivating Delight: A Natural History of My Garden*. HarperCollins, 2001.

Cornwall, Andrea. *Women's Empowerment: What Works?* Journal of International Development: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. vol.28, no.3, 2016.

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2016.

Ibrahim, Solava, and Sabina, Alkire. *Agency & Empowerment: a Proposal for Internationally Comparable Indicators*, OPHI Working Paper: Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2007.

Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press, 2015.

Sedgwick, Eve K. *Touching Feeling: Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2002.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

Tsing, Anna L. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Zulch, Sebastian. *Embracing Radical Softness: An Interview with Poet and Artist Lora Mathis*. HelloFlo, 4 Dec. 2016, helloflo.com/embracing-radical-softness-interview-poet-artist-lora-mathis/.