

Chasing Clouds

By

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Dora Agbas

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degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Chasing Clouds

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Abstract

I investigate my environment by walking, observing, collecting, sorting, organizing, and experimenting with materials which present themselves in the place I inhabit. Many times overlooked or discarded materials peak my curiosity, and sometimes I like to find a new purpose for their existence. My constructions reorganize inorganic, organic, and man-made materials and reimagine them in new forms. My practice is a continuously evolving conversation with material.

I prefer handling and touching things with my own hands; this allows me to understand how to engage with different qualities of matter. Haptic knowledge, this elemental understanding and learning based on touch and playful experimentation helps me to combine, rework, and transform these ingredients to generate new artifacts. My creative play is fueled by my curiosity and guided by my life experience and my reverence for nature.

As all of nature is constantly in the process of transformation, my work meditates on life, death, and renewal. My aim is to draw the viewers' attention to the beauty of nature. I entice people to look more closely and to notice the commonly overlooked. I call on the observer to acknowledge and appreciate the ephemerality of all.

Acknowledgment

The University of Kansas MFA program allowed me to chase clouds, to daydream, to experiment without thinking of specific results in mind, to ultimately find new ways of expression. This program granted me the opportunity to leave the research bench for an art studio.

Foremost, I would like to thank Mary Anne Jordan, who has the most generous spirit being always present to listen, help, share, encourage, and advise.

I thank my other committee members, Yoonmi Nam, who always pushes uncomfortably for the benefit of yielding better results, and Gina Westergard, who always recognizes the core of things and lets me go where I want. Together with the chair, Mary Anne Jordan, they were the perfect committee together to push and pull my thesis in shape.

I am indebted to Jennifer Baker, who before I had a clue understood what I was doing and pointed it out to me.

I would like to thank Linda Samson Talleur for her patient guidance and her trust in my undertaking of *Walkabout*, which could not have happened without the opportunity she gave me to work in the Letterpress lab.

Chasing Clouds would not have been of the exhibit as it became without the fantastic haptic knowledge of Cotter Mitchell, whose skilled carpentry work.

As a “mature” student I have to acknowledge my MFA cohort, which remarkably well tolerated the gaping age void between us and offered camaraderie and friendship. A big thank you to Tristan Lindo, who is always there to help.

I am grateful for my daughter, Tuba’s moral support and my son, Emre’s enthusiastic help with installation.

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Chasing Clouds

Let's take a walk. The light breeze creates a shimmering gold lake as the grass moves in waves. The clouds slowly march above head creating an ever changing magic landscape. In the distance a shapeshifting cloud, a great flock of birds, murmurate pulsating in and out of focus. On land the sunshine brightens the drab browns; the ochres and rusty purples start to sing. The warm air carries the ripen taste of the earth, which gently gives way. The buzz of hustling insects provide acoustic accompaniment and the underfoot crunch supplies the drumbeat as a pair of walking feet turn on the path.

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Chasing Clouds creates a walk introducing my artistic journey as I wander around the area picking up bits and pieces investigating my environment, that inspires me to sort through amassed materials and in some way or other transform them by my creative play (Fig.1.). This practice is an elemental human occupation; these primordial actions led humans on an evolutionary road. Walking on our hind legs not only allowed us to see further out onto the horizon, but it required major computational brain development to process and harmonize sensory inputs and motor functions as the body teeters on one foot balancing and stepping forward. It also allotted the free front limbs to develop new functions, to become arms that can pick things up and carry them away. Importantly these free arms could carry away *in situ* prepared tools. As tools could be carried and reused, tool making became more sophisticated; and soon they were more functional and worth the effort of transport. Handling of materials in order to prepare tools developed not only manual dexterity but thinking and reasoning. Manipulation of plant fibers was one of the earliest important steps in tool making. The

significance of cords and ropes, lashing together things to carry or connect wood to stone for tool making, should not be underestimated. Thanks to the development of more advanced technologies there is direct archeological evidence proving that cordage making was in the hominids' repertoire already 45,000 years ago.

I walk in their footsteps as I experiment with cordage making by trying out different plant fibers as base material for making very fine or very rudimental cordages. These experiments are placed in one of the exhibited drawers.



Partial exhibit view showing drawer installation

Referencing natural history museum displays, the collected organic materials are lined up as specimens or create a simulated forest floor in the drawers. Other drawers contain maps or simple hand tools that I use regularly. The boxed drawers also function as shelves holding objects I made by transforming some of the collected organic materials. The displayed work invites the viewer for a closer look and encourages further exploration as the drawers can be opened to discover more items.

Two of the shelves hold the collection of mended fruit peels, titled *Skin Deep Memories*. The knife cut peels are stitched back together using colored floss reconstructing the form of the fruit. Making these harks back to my time as a research scientist, when I stitched up the skin of experimental rats after surgery. Suturing was a necessary action then, now these stitchings don't save the fruit, but create frivolous, transformed objects that are the results of my playful interaction with the material.



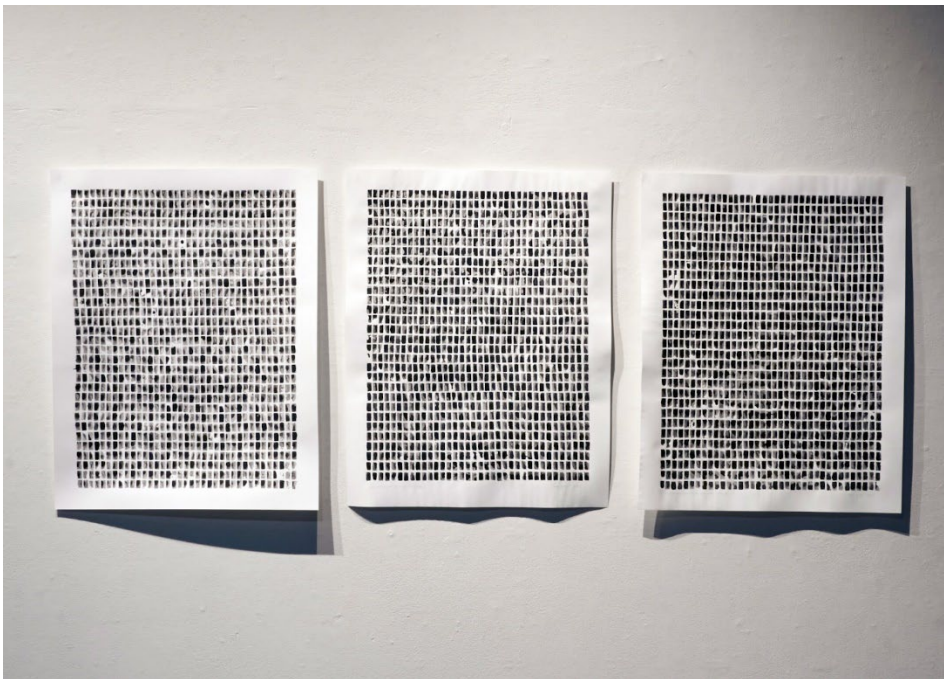
Skin Deep Memories, assorted fruit peels, floss, acrylic medium and composition gold leaf, 2019-2022

Creative play freed from the constraints of rigorous scientific investigation, a form of experimentation, is an important way of learning. Play by definition means the engagement in recreational avocation, however, it can denote vocational activity; thinking of a musician or actor, play means a serious occupation. Playing with materials at hand aided by previous experiences and relying on imagination develops potentially useful haptic knowledge.

Mending the fruit was done differently when the peel was torn and not carefully cut away. Similarly to fixing a broken pot, glue and imitation kintsugi was used to re-fashion the forms. The usually discarded peel was treated with respect, creating reverential tangerine mummies. Kintsugi originating in Zen practice teaches the appreciation of ordinary, simple everyday objects. The kintsugi method is developed for reassembling broken pieces of pottery

using lacquer and the final application of gold. This does not work for fruit peel, since the organic material would rot in the humid conditions necessary for the process. In this case the method needed to be modified to conform to the material at hand by experimentation.

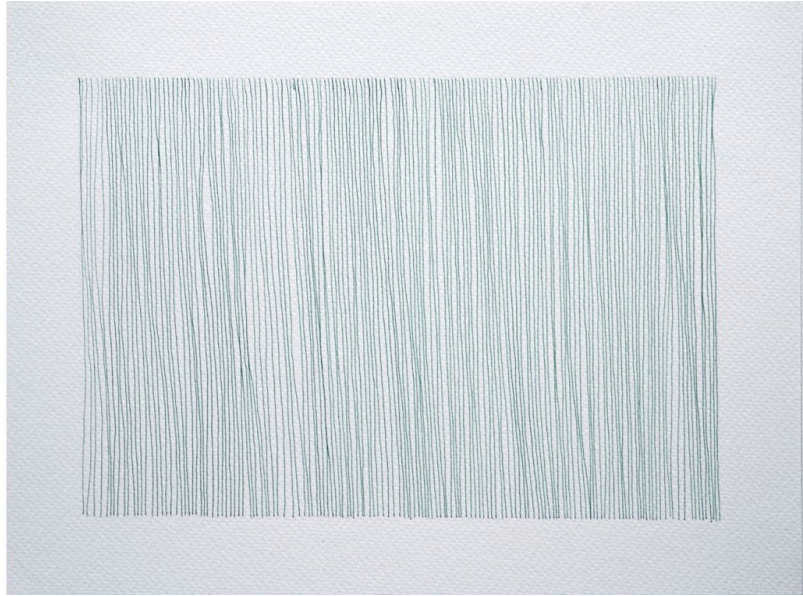
Exploration or experimentation without a specific purpose embraces accidents and thus allows for the unexpected to surface. Accidental surprises, when grasped, can lead to new forms of investigation, like in the case of *Collaboration with Ink and Time*.



Collaboration with Ink and Time 1, 2 & 3, 28"x22" (each), ink on paper, 2021-22

These pieces play with mark making determined by the material (inkstick), my hand, and their changing relationship as time passes from one movement to another; from one sheet of paper to another. The marks are laid out in a certain order, but their shape and intensity change each time they are made, creating a sense of vibration between movement and standstill. The deviation from calmness and focus is investigated in *Penance*, where the repeated vertical lines, hand

drawn by a fountain pen, register slight shifts in my state of mind as they gather on the pages day after day. I am curious to learn about myself through the use of inanimate bodies, however, I don't want to analyze or interpret these results scientifically. Suspended in space, the pages enhance the pulsation of lines by their own slight movement, and perhaps create a different meaning that reveals itself to the viewer as they add their own layer of examination upon them.



Installation of *Penance* and individual page detail, 9"x12" (individual sheet), ink on paper, 2020

In *Studio Surveillance* I totally remove myself from the experiment by delegating data acquisition to pinhole cameras. The pinhole cameras are the actors documenting my creative process by collecting views of my studio. As the simple box gathers light through a pinhole an image develops on photosensitive paper placed inside. Putting these developed photographs back into a box recalls their original creation. As the viewers peep into the box, they look into my studio observing the place with scattered materials around that I use in the process of making.



Studio Surveillance, installation of pinhole camera photographs (2.5”x1.5” – 5”x4”) in acrylic boxes, 2022

The alchemy of the place we inhabit influences our way of thinking. What we conjure up is inseparable from our past experiences with place/s and our memories. *Chasing Clouds* was formed by the experience of being on campus, which inspired the urge to walk in the landscape, to collect, and to make use of the found, natural materials. The pandemic has interrupted this process and forcefully changed my work environment and habits. This shift to working from home stamped its effect on *Twenty Walks* and *Walkabout*, both of which stemmed from a walking practice during COVID and are manifested in the production of handmade artist books. The alchemy of the suburban environment altered the outcome of my walking practice, as space influences the way we interact and create. The collected objects serve as mementos of each of

the walks. They also become mnemonic devices that help me recall the place and the day when the object was found on my walk. Things occupy our memories, and our lives are indivisible from the environment. We belong with the things around us; our humanity is reflected in the things we hold dear.

Repetition of approaches, processes, and forms is a fundamental method of organization. Constitutionally every material is a collection of repeated elements, every action is a collection of repeated motion or motions. Repetition of accumulating units creates a pattern recognizable microscopically or apparent as a rhythmic patterning of a field of grass or trees in a forest. A repeated action of a hammer, a needle, or a pen creates new things endowed by these repeated patterns. As they pile up the elements reveal an unconscious sense of rhythm, like in *Penance*. In *Hurdle* the sticks are arranged consciously to satisfy an instinctive cadence, which animates and transforms these simple branches to create new meaning. *Unbridled*, like the haiku of *Walkabout*, where groupings of syllables create a poem, the collection of similar elements united by their material, color, and basic construction creates a visual poem.



Unbridled, 48"x54", hemp cord, 2021

In both *Hurdle* and *Unbridled*, and in many other pieces like *Omenta*, *Weep* and *Peril* there is an additional relationship between elements and their shadows, which introduces a new conversation between material, light, and our perception.

Of Mud is a key piece, which summarizes the way I converse with materials as I transform and combine them. It is simply a collection of objects as they are, plainly picked up or obviously manipulated or transformed into a seemingly different material. Confronted by this work, the viewer wonders of its material makeup or whether its elements are found or made. I seek to impart my curiosity about existence to the viewer by this collection of liminal objects. As all things are ephemeral and in flux, including our own bodies and perceptions. The maker, the object, and the viewer are all influencing each other by “being there”.



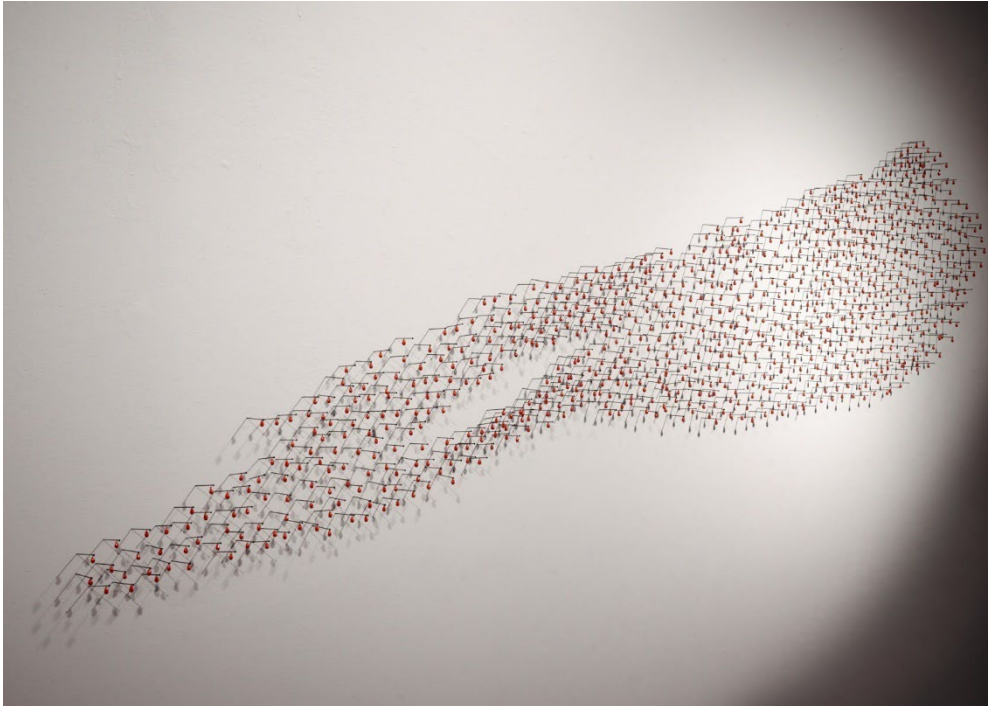
Of Mud, 4”x32”x30, wire, paper, felt, cordage, stone, and assorted plant materials, 2022

Chasing Clouds turns into a different meaning in *Peril*, which is installed in the lofty area of the gallery. Perhaps *Chasing Clouds* grows into a wishful of “chasing away clouds”. The small organic remnants gathered on campus are reverentially sorted and placed in small vessels made out of paper and pine needles. They float on a golden pond on the floor. In order to observe these tiny organic residues, which are generally unnoticed on one’s hurried commute, the viewer is contrived to bow forward, as my hopeful intention is for these tiny elements to be noticed and adored. The gently moving cloud forms that hang above, suggest a serene scene with the gold reflecting back on them from below, perhaps representing more of melancholy than peacefulness. It is like the calm before storm, a foreboding of a gathering threat which endangers our environment.



Peril, wire, paper, graphite, encaustic medium, assorted collected organic remains, composition gold leaf, cords, pulleys, and cleats, 2022

Similarly, in *Weep* the accumulation of simple red glass beads nailed on the wall, shaping a cloud, delights viewers with the gentle movement of each bead and their shadow play, while its title provokes the vision of tears, and its color of blood.



Weep, 27”x 90”x 1.5”, glass beads and bank pins, 2022

I titled both *Weep* and *Peril* hinting about bigger existential issues we all face, but my hope is that the viewer will find pleasure in each piece when calling forth their own associations. My motivation is to invoke wonder rather than to present a didactic display; as a clear message can be quickly accepted or rejected, but wonder lingers and inspires the seeking of knowledge or evokes emotional resonance.

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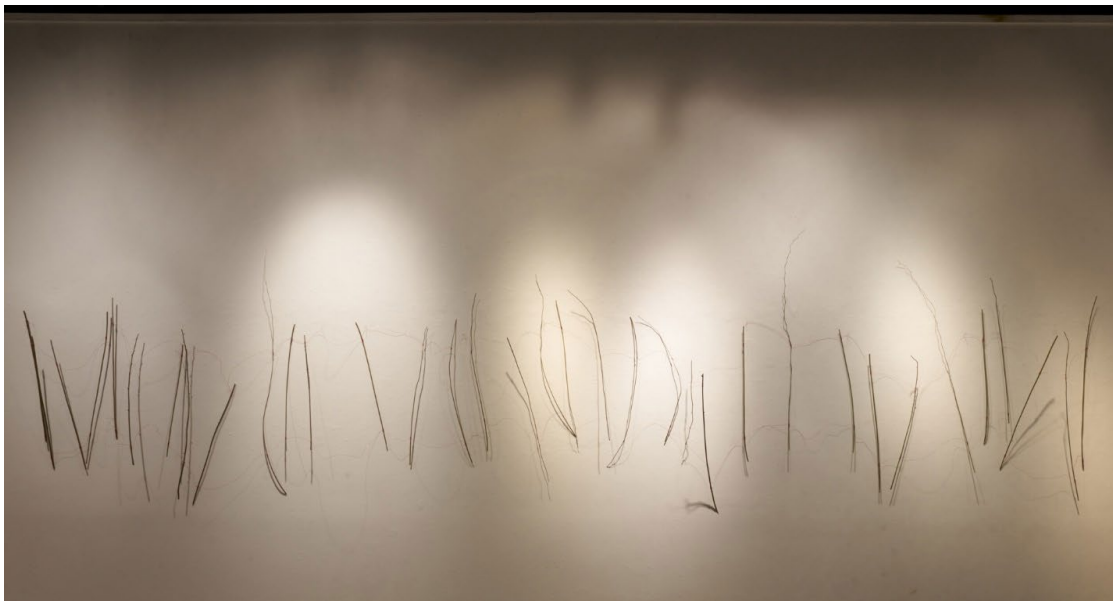
There is an audible quiet around. Leaves whisper the last golden tales of the fall, then with a faint push start their final dance downward like whirling dervishes. The soft gust abates and the

steps are slicing through silent stillness. Torn clouds veil the sun to orchestrate a quick play with colors and shadows. The sopranos of yellows mellow down. The tenors of tender greens and blues are subdued by the baritones of browns. Maroons and purples are muted into drab rags of a beggar. The sky changes and the wind picks up again animating everything around. The fallen leaves lift up to perform a tentative pirouette. The ground curls up in front. Here and there stones surface from the supple dirt like swimmers coming up for air as the path undulates like a slow river. The twiddle twaddle of gathering birds enlivens the bushes, whose shadows play tricks as the dozing sun's head starts sinking. The stars come out; we are home.

Additional Images



Exhibit view, east side



Hurdle, 40"x240"x15", *Kerria japonica* branches and wire, 2022



Omenta, 38"x25", trumpet vine seeds and thread, 2022



Peril, detail



Peril, detail - assorted organic remains in paper and pine needle bowls on gold leaf surface



Peril, detail – cicadas



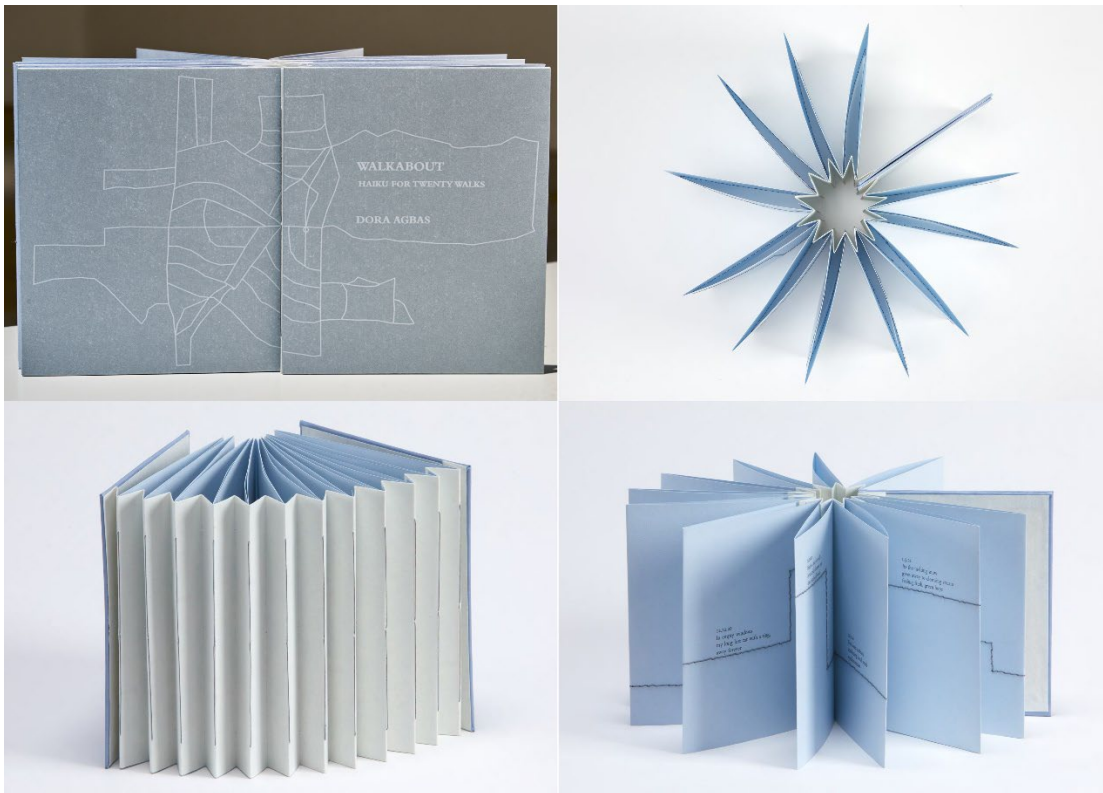
Peril, detail



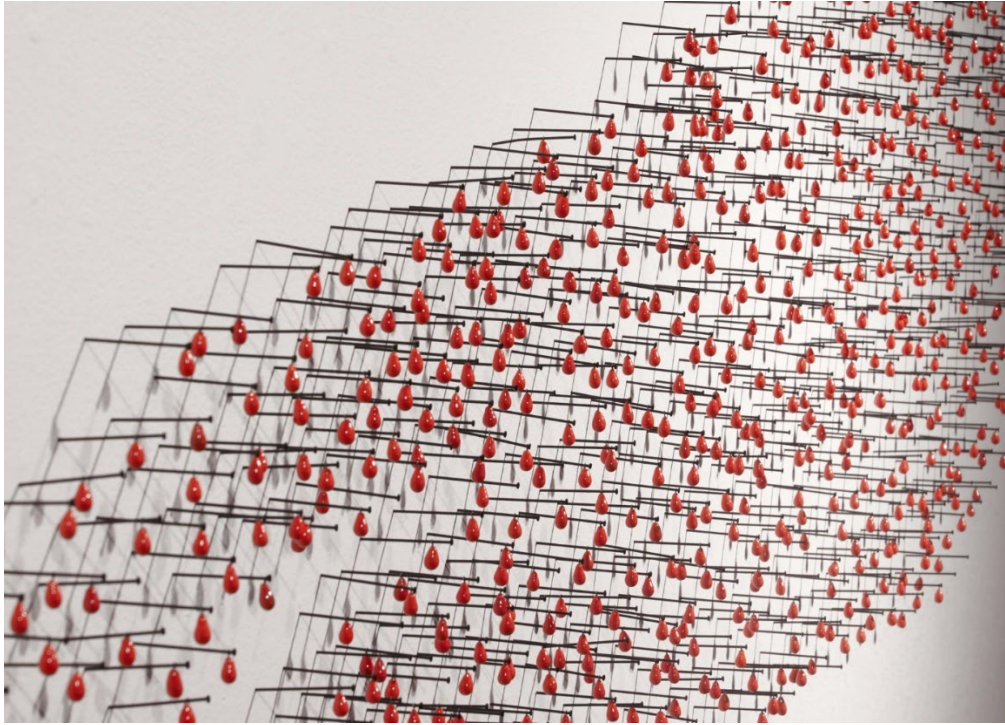
Display drawer with collection of organic matter – “forest floor”



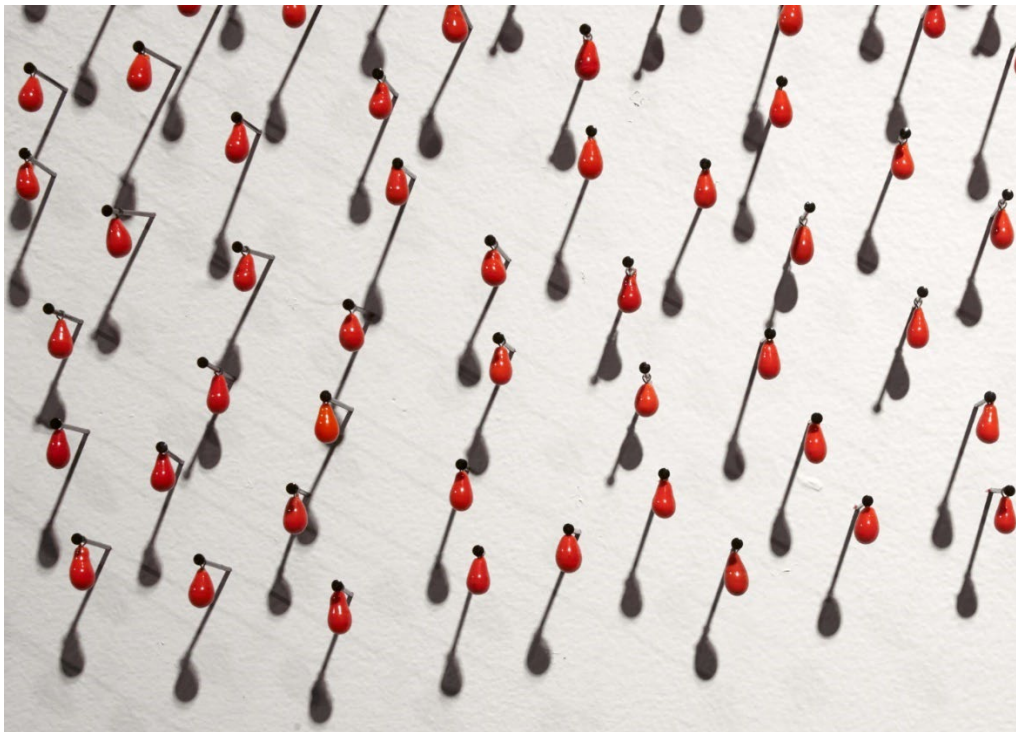
Display drawer with cordages and crocheted sisal cord



Walkabout, letterpress printed artist book, 6"x5"x1" (closed), edition:25, 2021



Weep, detail



Weep, detail

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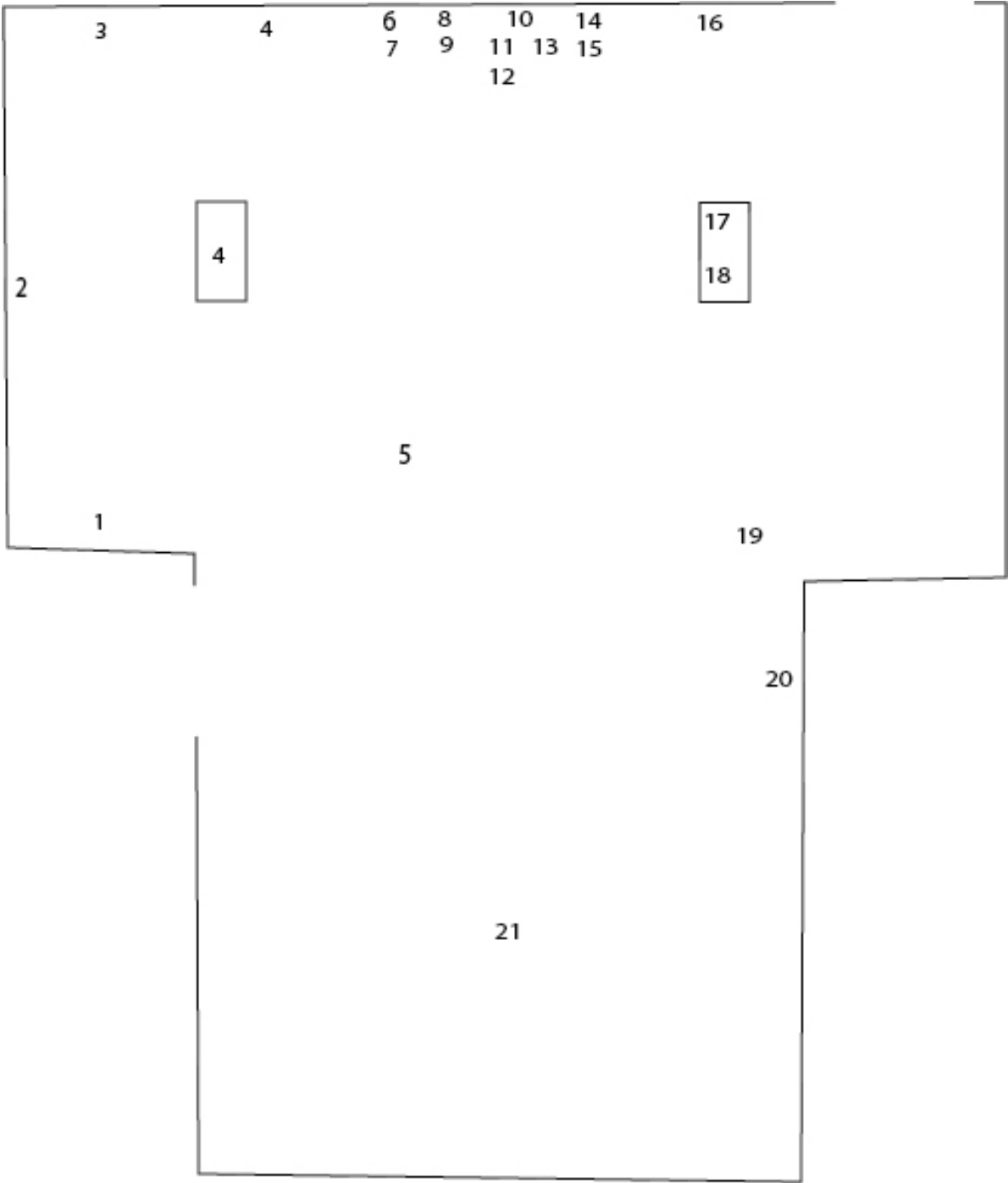
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Appendix

Gallery map and list of works



1. Studio Surveillance (pinhole camera photographs in acrylic peep boxes)
2. Hurdle (Kerria japonica branches and colored copper wire)
3. Unbridled (hemp cord)
4. Manual Utterances (wire, paper, felt, cotton thread, waxed linen, hemp cord, thorns, plaster, and unmanipulated plant materials)
5. Penance (ink on paper)
6. Omenta (Trumpet vine seed and thread)
7. Drawer 1: Collection of cordages
8. Clamber (ash leaf stalks and copper wire)
9. Drawer 2: Map of collection sites
10. Skin Deep Memories (assorted fruit peels, embroidery floss, waxed linen, glue, and composition gold leaf)
11. Drawer 3: Tools
12. Drawer 4: Ready for Defense (teasel seed pods)
13. Drawer 5: Specimens (Sycamore bark and evergreen bagworm cocoons)
14. Walk on Campus (woven cotton and plant materials in a scroll box)
15. Drawer 6: Collection of natural materials (“forest floor”)
16. Collaboration with Ink and Time 1,2,3
17. Twenty Walks (Collection of found materials in individual maple boxes, 2 tier maple housing box, and artist book)
18. Walkabout (Letterpress printed haiku collection in a sculptural artist book form, edition of 25)
19. Of Mud (wire, paper, felt, stone, cordage, hemp cord, and assorted plant materials)

20. Weep (glass beads and bank pins)

21. Peril (wire, paper, graphite, encaustic medium, pine needles, found plant, fungi, and animal remains, composition gold leaf, cord, pulleys, and cleats)