

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: HOW FAR DOES THE GRID GO?

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Master of Fine Arts
2019

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My artwork probes the connection between daily life and what I perceive as the larger grid out there—a mesh that entangles all peoples, beings and things, cuts across all time, and is always in flux. Drawing from my everyday life and experiences as a Latin American immigrant, I incorporate materials from my suburban home environment in my multidisciplinary approach. I create organic forms and grids that abstract, excavate, ground and find universal truths in the quotidian. They also serve as platforms for engaging obliquely with history, science, archeology, philosophy, and magic realism. My artwork invites viewers to engage with their own associations, experiences, and feelings. It brings attention to the power of our imagination to infuse the material world, particularly nature, with fluid possibilities of meaning and subjectivity. This thesis describes my inspirations and art-making process.

HOW FAR DOES THE GRID GO?

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters in Fine Arts
2019

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How Far Does the Grid Go?

I have always been fascinated with occurrences that cannot be fully explained. Natural phenomena, archeological discoveries, space explorations, and historical enigmas captivate me. Where the frontiers of knowledge give way to the uncertain holds for me a kind of magic. So do the many ways in which people attempt to fill the void of what they cannot explain. I am intrigued by the ways in which science, history, philosophy and archeology go about mapping the known and speculating about the unknown. I am also captivated by the writings of Jorge Luis Borges and magic realism fiction writers who attempt to explain the workings of the universe by combining portrayals of everyday life with fantastical elements.

My art practice engages obliquely with science, archeology, philosophy, history and magic realism, probing the connection between daily life and what I perceive as the larger grid out there—an interconnected mesh that entangles all peoples, beings and things, cuts across all time, and is always in flux. Drawing from my everyday life and experiences as a Latin American immigrant, I incorporate materials from my suburban home environment in my multidisciplinary approach. I create organic forms and grids that serve as platforms to abstract, excavate, ground and find universal truths in the quotidian. My organic forms and grids invite viewers to interpret them based on their own feelings and associations. They thus bring attention to the power of our imagination to infuse the material world, particularly nature, with fluid possibilities of meaning and subjectivity.

The starting point for my artistic creation is always the materials. I am hopelessly addicted to the malleability of things and engage in extensive

experimentation in my studio. I use acrylic paints and ink, as well as raw materials like clay and beeswax, or more synthetic ones like cement, bird netting and polylactic acid (PLA) filament. I also use oils, detergents, packaging materials, eggshells and a wide range of materials found around my suburban home environment.

To a small degree, my work has an element of object-oriented-ontology. Inspired by writers like Timothy Morton, object-oriented artists explore whether “things, animals, and other non-human entities experience their existence in a way that lies outside our own species-centric definition of consciousness.”¹ I believe that my manipulation of materials probes into how the materials feel and what they have to say. It is as though they have an art form already in them ready to emerge, if only I can figure out how to help them release it. I think that Michelangelo was probably right in asserting that a sculpture existed inside the marble blocks he carved.

I am always mindful of the materials’ narratives that precede my art-making. For instance, cement has a long history of being used in human industry, while PLA filament is a recent development in our increasingly synthetic and cheaply manufactured world. Eggshells command particular respect for me, because they come from animals that live, suffer and die for our consumption. I like to keep the materials’ narratives hidden or enigmatic, forcing viewers to wonder why I chose those materials, or in some cases, wonder what materials I used at all to make my artwork. However, the evidence of my process visible in the organic forms and grids I create always suggests that there is a trajectory, a history, a story, or a memory being shared.

¹ Kerr, Dylan. “What is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World” in *Artspace* (April 8, 2016).

In this regard, one of my inspirations is artist Cecilia Vicuña. She describes her large and diverse body of work as being about what has “not yet formed.”² She is known for her performances, weavings, and monumental sculptures made with fabric depicting *quipus* (the un-deciphered pre-Colombian string and knot records of the Incan Empire that I have also used as reference in my artwork). However, my favorite work of hers is a collection of small sculptures she calls *precarios* made from trash and found objects (see Figure 1). By making works with these materials, she draws attention to all that is discarded—the “uncertain, exposed to hazards, insecure.” In my art practice, the use of objects, liquids and tools found in my home environment also brings the narratives of these materials into play, stealthily grounding my art in the materiality of my daily life.



Fig. 1: Installation view of Cecilia Vicuña’s *Precarios*, 1966-2017 (from Jordan Amirkhani, “Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans,” in *Daily Serving* (Apr. 4, 2017))

² See Cecilia Vicuña at ceciliavicuna.com/about.

For the most part, I stage tests with the materials, so they can create the artwork for me, at least partially, by trial and error. For each series of artworks I make, I come up with particular testing parameters, depending on the materials involved and the effect I think I need to obtain. I start with one test, and then, based on what I see, go on to the next and the next and the next, adjusting the parameters each time, just to see the range of possibilities of the materials. If I really like a result, I might repeat it multiple times to create a group of similes, each time adding inevitable or intentional variations. Once I have enough images or objects, I spend considerable time deciding how they will be organized and a clear arrangement crystalizes, often in the form of a progression or hierarchy, a grid, or a cluster. Sometimes, though, I end up discarding an entire series, saving just one or two results, which I display as solo pieces.

To illustrate how this works, for a series of two-dimensional wall pieces, I might set out to make marks by cutting slightly the surface of a sheet of paper or wood panel, then drawing gesturally on it with strokes of water-based ink and linseed oil, allowing the liquids to finish the image as they repel each other and penetrate the incisions on the substrate (see Figure 2). I will then repeat the process many times, varying the types of cuts on the substrate, the proportion of ink and oil, or adding other liquids, like bleach or vinegar. After waiting for all of this to dry, I will toss the ones that are clear failures, and start arranging the ones I deem successful until I find one or more ways in which they look best as a group (see Figures 3 and 4).



Fig. 2: *Linseed oil pixelated and blotted a gestural drawing made with water-based walnut ink, creating this abstracted painting. The liquids also followed the direction of thin cuts in the wood panel substrate—"Ink Blot," 2018 (12" x 12")*



Fig. 3: Example of the sole survivor in a series of tests on large sheets of paper lightly cut with a kitchen butcher's knife. "The Strata Beneath my House," 2017 (ink and charcoal on paper, 27" x 48")

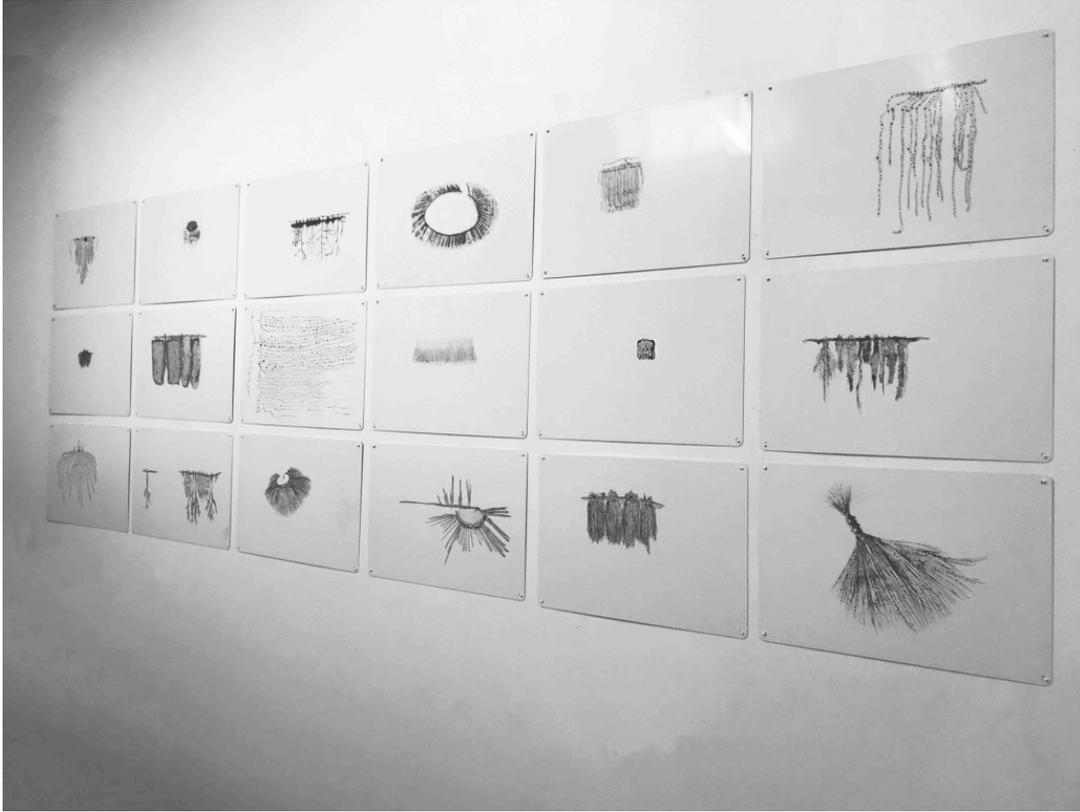


Fig. 4: Example of made-up organic forms derived from an archeological object arranged in a grid system—“Root Inklings,” 2018 (sumi ink, linseed oil, oil crayons, acrylic on blank street speed signs; 18 plates, 20” x 14” each)

Another example of how my trial and error process might work out is *Almost* (see Figures 5 and 6), a video piece I made for the thesis exhibition concurrent with this writing, which I entitled *Marks of Existence*. When I was making an earlier body of works, I noticed that when exposed to heat, plastic bird netting coils and curls. This led me to realize that bird netting has performative qualities. So, I bundled up a piece of plastic bird netting, set it in front of a white sheet of paper, casted a dramatic light on it, blasted it with a heat gun, and captured the meltdown on footage. Excited that the plastic looked alive while melting, as if the material was literally drawing for me, I repeated this process dozens of times, adding intentional and accidental variations. I then spent many hours selecting meltdowns and editing together the footage,

spending endless hours deciding on the sequencing and cadence of the video. In the end, the video portrays a ball of black mesh that folds and almost unfolds over and over, each time with variations in shape, intensity and speed. The video was projected during the thesis show at about 8' x 6' against a wall in a large open space. Viewers could see the projection from far or sit at a bench close by. Overall, the video created a fluid mood or phenomena.



Fig. 5: Still from the video loop *“Almost,”* 2019, included in my thesis exhibition entitled *“Marks of Existence”* (10:47 minutes)

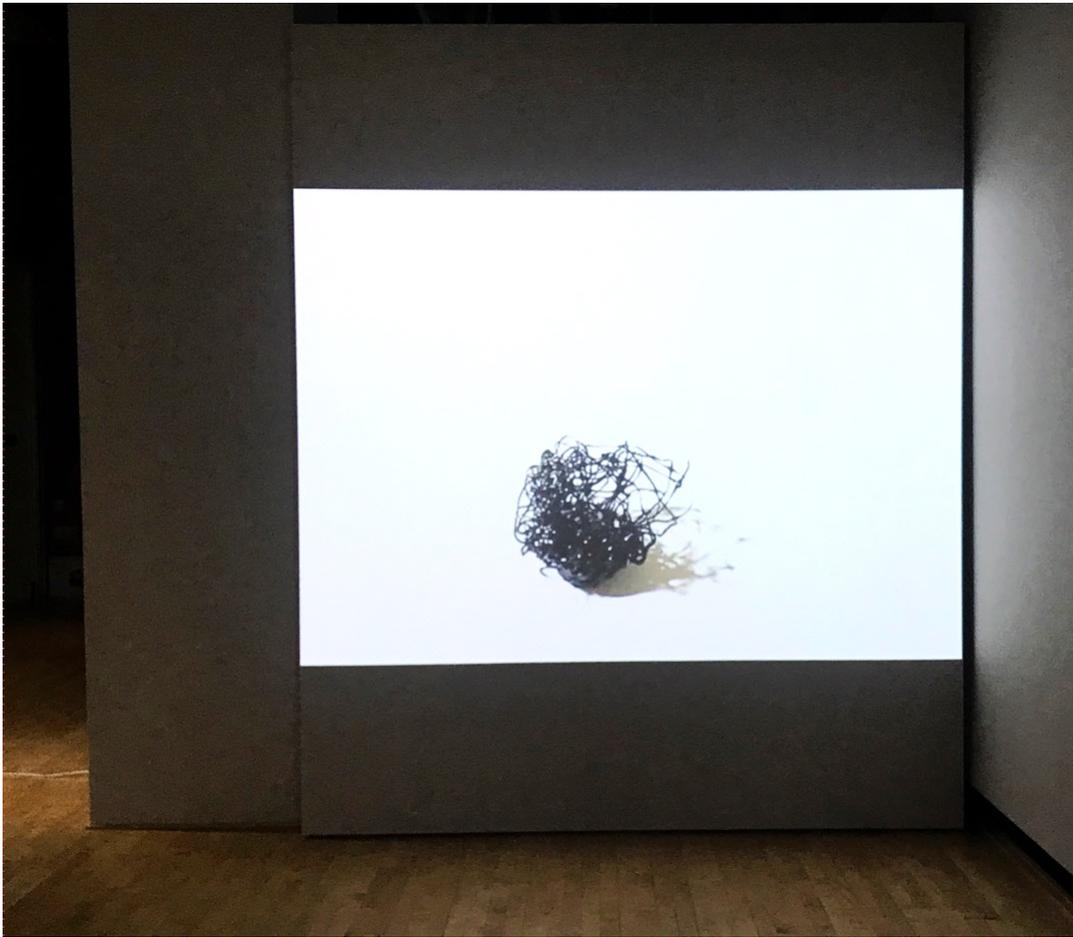


Fig. 6: Projection view of "Almost," 2019

Accompanying the video loop in my thesis exhibition was a large installation made with PLA filament, entitled *At this Moment* (see Figure 7), which also illustrates the experimental, repetitive, and labor intensive nature of my art practice. In the months preceding the show, I spent months testing with a three-dimensional pen the limits of the PLA filament. I realized earlier on that the filament takes on the quality of human hair or root growths when stretched while hot. Later, I discovered that the filament takes on the shapes of surfaces while hot, then stiffens in shape when cooled, like a casting material. This led me to crisscross the filament on my knees, hands, bundles of clothing and other objects found in my home environment, then

peeling the shape off. I made over two hundred vessel-like forms this way. Each form relates to the one made before, but no two are identical, and a number of odd-ones-out populate the grouping.



Fig. 7: Installation view of “*At this Moment*,” 2019, included in my thesis exhibition “*Marks of Existence*” (polylactic acid filament; approximately 30’ long and 11’ tall)

I arranged the forms for the installation of *At this Moment* as a spontaneous but plausible natural formation, hanging from two walls that met at a corner, eleven-feet tall and approximately thirty feet long in total. The forms created migrations and clusters, some hung directly from the wall, while others were suspended from the ceiling with black threads (see Figure 8). The air movement in the room caused the hanging forms to gently sway and rotate. I lit the installation so as to create dramatic shadows of the forms on the walls. The filament and shadows interlocked, creating

the notion of a primary and secondary line, the filament being pure black, while the shadows covered a wide range of gray tonality. Viewers were greeted by the installation to their right as they walked into the gallery. Overall, the installation confused the boundaries between a two- and three-dimensional work and had an ephemeral, unstable snapshot quality.

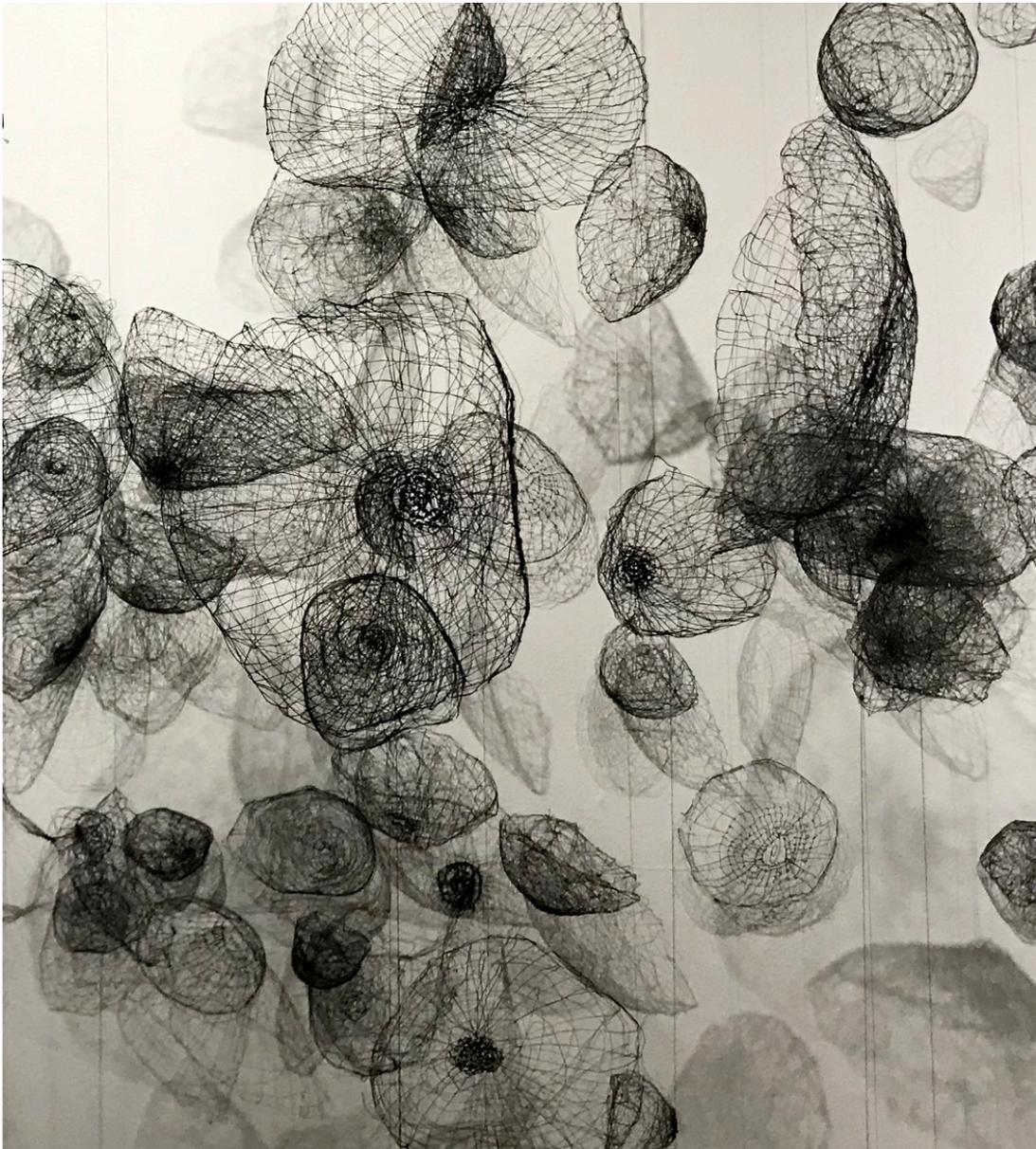


Fig. 8: Close view of “At this Moment,” 2019

There is an ontological bent to my art-making process. When testing and manipulating materials, I am always asking myself what are the possibilities for change in the materials. What are they trying to become? How do they connote change? I am also trying to assess their relationships and how to structure or display the resulting images or forms. Which ones belong together or form a hierarchy? How can I group or subdivide them according to their similarities and differences? It is a balancing act engaging my logical side and my more intuitive, subjective one.

The grid has evolved in my art practice as the main structuring tool. I use grids to organize the picture plane, particularly when making map-like images (see Figure 9). Grids are also my favorite way of displaying two-dimensional works that belong to the same series of trial and error tests (see Figure 4 above). My grids are never regular, they are always warped, distorted, entangled or in need of repair. Sometimes, they take on the form of cross-contours, especially to create objects, as is the case of both *Almost* and *At this Moment* (see Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8 above).



Fig. 9: Example from my work of grids that structure the picture plane—“Views from an Airplane,” 2017 (clay, cement, bird netting, beeswax, paraffin wax, paper, acrylic, wood; 6 panels 12” x 24” each)

One of my inspirations for adopting the grid is Paul Cezanne, who often structured his paintings by creating with lines and brushstrokes a grid-like rhythm across the image (see Figures 10 and 11). Likewise, I am captivated by Egon Schiele's portrayals of the built environment that also organize the picture-plane with a grid-like rhythm of lines and shapes (see Figure 12). Schiele's town paintings are beautiful ways of portraying the fast-sprawling intervention of humans in the landscape. They seem a bit precarious and intentionally raw. His famous contour line and gestural mark-making capturing a sense of distortion and anguish, though not as dramatically as his figurative work does.

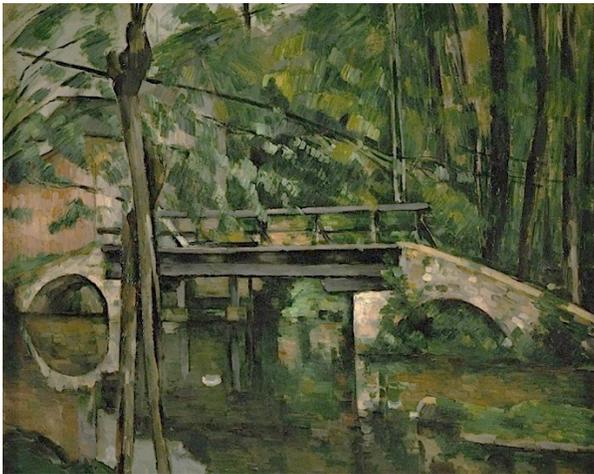


Fig. 10: Painting creating a grid-like rhythm of lines and brushstrokes. Paul Cezanne, "The Bridge at Maincy," 1879



Fig. 11: Another painting creating a grid-like surface with lines, planes and brushstrokes. Paul Cezanne, "Bibemus Quarry," 1900



Fig. 12: Egon Scheile, "Old Houses in Krumau," 1914

My grids also take on the form of contours and gestures to bring a kind of subjectivity into play. I combine the gestural qualities of my work with a heavy use of layering, adding and subtracting. I am drawn to the idea of ruins, or things that are buried, forgotten and in need of being excavated. When working on two-dimensional pieces, I might layer a handful of materials on the surface, then carve parts of it out, scratching and digging, giving it a decaying look, excavating the surface to reveal part of the layers beneath. I am also drawn to imprints. I sometimes lay down a thick coat of acrylic medium, then press objects, like leaves or a cheese grater, against it so they can leave a subdued mark. Other times, I start a work from a rubbing, which I make by putting tracing paper on a surface (like a window screen or a computer's mother board) then rub a piece of charcoal or pencil against it to get a tracing of the object's surface. In addition, I am interested in things that are peeled off from

something, like my PLA forms, which are like a tossed skin or shell. This brings into my work elements of generation and degeneration, loss and recovery.

When assembling clusters of objects as in *At this Moment*, I dive into another kind of elusive subjectivity. I often think of the groupings of similes I create as being collectively a single persona. The individual small forms that make up the larger overall form are then like internal facets, like an x-ray view of its innards and spirit. Other times, I feel that the grouping is instead an extended family. Each smaller form is like one of its members, with individual traits and commonalities with the clan. In either event, I am probing into the intimacy of whimsical structures that are complex and irregular, as if trying to make sense of them by placing them in a structure system, which is enormously satisfying to me.

Eva Hesse's simple progressions and modular clusters of organic forms have long inspired my way of making art. Hesse's work often employed multiple forms of similar shapes organized together in grids or clusters (see Figure 13). Described as post-minimalist, Hesse manipulated unconventional materials in a repetitive, labor-intensive way, changing them minimally but transforming them completely. To me, her pieces are representations of natural elements that are playfully and sensually fantastical. Her drawings and her sculptures are like contours or gestures that are both spontaneous but systematized, ancient but modern, synthetic but natural—all of which I aspire to conjure in my practice.



Fig. 13: Eva Hesse, "Repetition Nineteen III," 1968

I recently learned that the concept of a family of shapes that has both regularities and irregularities is part of the study of fractal geometry. While Euclidian geometry describes regular shapes like squares and circles, fractal geometry “describes many of the irregular and fragmented patterns around us,” says the founding figure in this field, Benoit Mandelbrot.³ He goes on to explain that, “[t]he most useful fractals involve ‘chance’ and both their regularities and irregularities are statistical” and “‘scaling,’ implying that their degree of irregularity and/or fragmentation is identical at all scales.” Families of fractals are generated from simple

³ See Mandelbrot, Benoit B. *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*. W.H. Freeman, 1983.

equations or formulas, they self-organize, but result in complex, irregular formations.⁴ They contain an equilibrium, but at the same time, depend on their environment to maintain their structure. Snowflakes and the delta of a river are classical examples of fractal geometries found in nature (see also Figure 14).

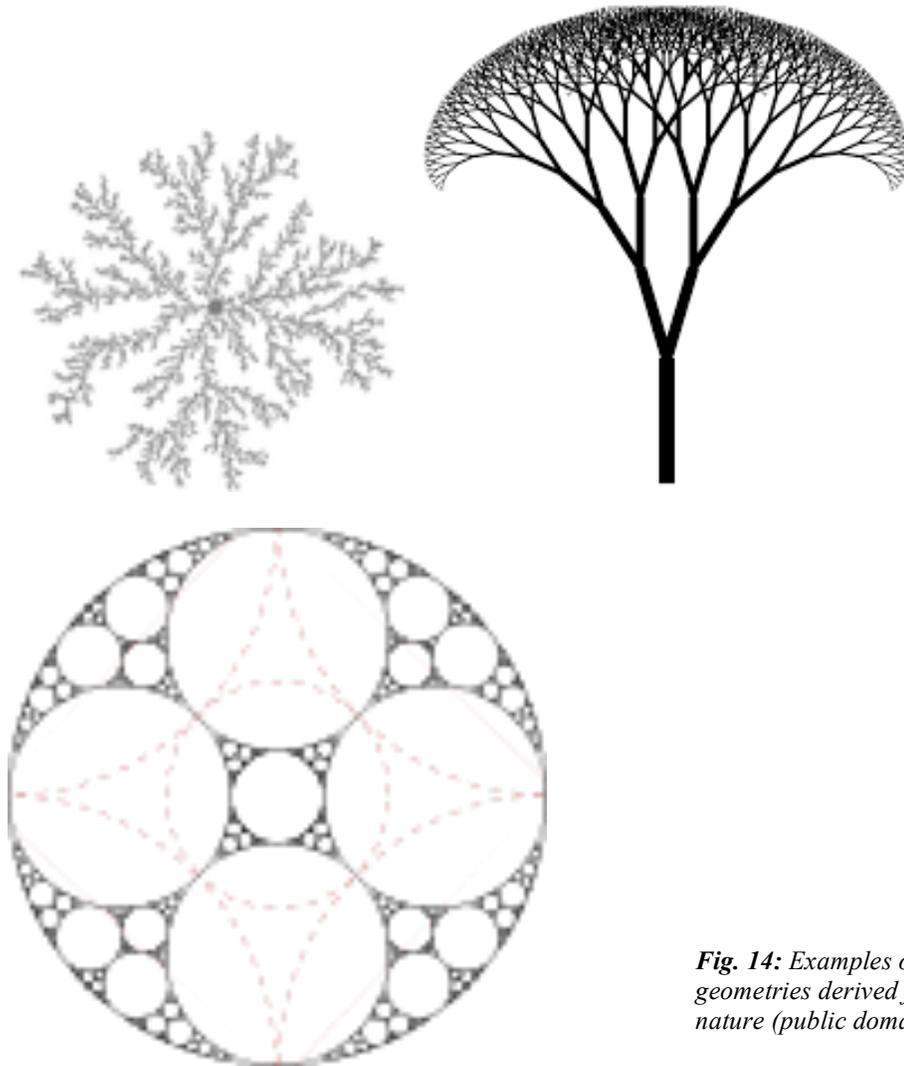


Fig. 14: Examples of common fractal geometries derived from forms found in nature (public domain sources)

⁴ Talanquer, Vicente. *Fractus, Fracta, Fractal. Fractales, de Laberintos y Espejos*. University of Arizona, 2019.

Fractal geometry taps into humanity's need to understand the logic of the universe, finding relationships that enable us to make predictions about the unknown.⁵ When we are unable to find this predictability, we fall into chaos. While I am by no means an expert in fractal geometry or chaos theory, I am captivated by its implications. My art process, too, is about chance and control, order and disorder, the predictable and unpredictable, certainty and speculation. It is no coincidence that I have portrayed many families of fractals in my work, albeit unbeknownst to myself. My series of depictions of *quipus* obsessively probed the branching out structures of these objects (see Figure 15). My families of nets are like snowflakes in that they are produced by a single, simple process, but each turns out unique (see Figure 16).

⁵ See Talanquer.

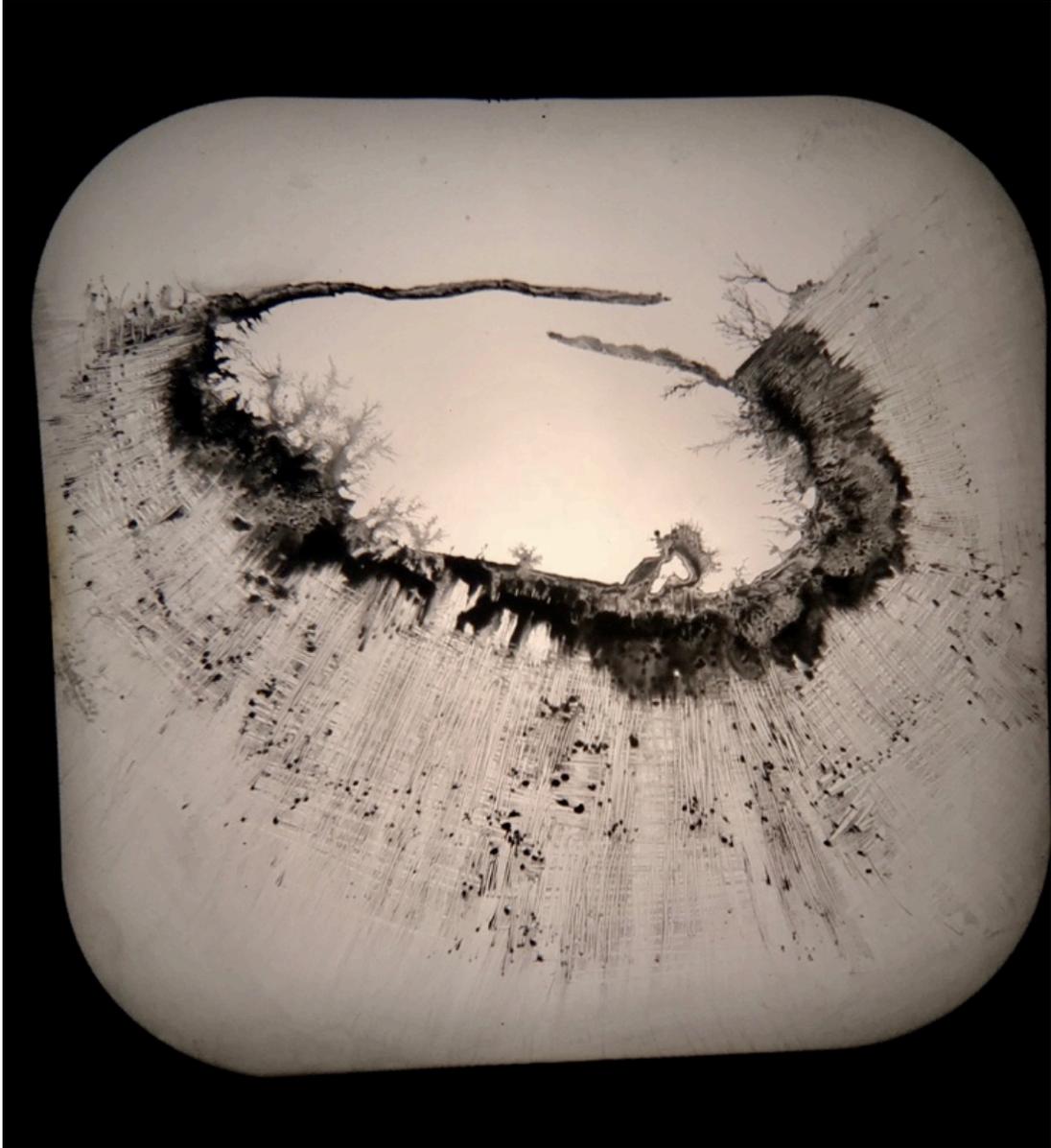


Fig. 15: Overhead projection of a drawing I made derived from a quipu, the un-deciphered pre-Colombian string and knot records of the Incan Empire, incorporating fractal branching out forms—“Quipu Reiteration,” 2018 (ink and oil on mylar, dimensions variable)

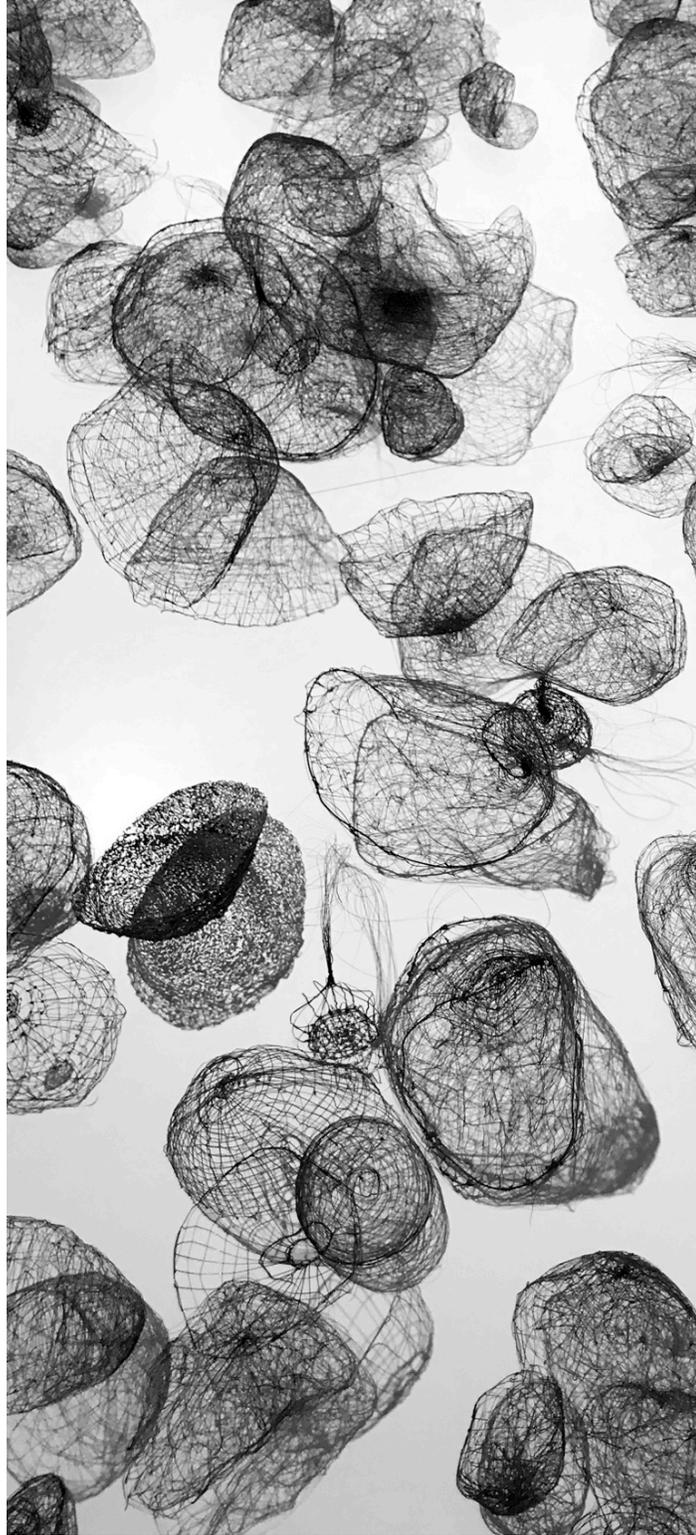


Fig. 16: Family of irregular organic forms I made resembling fractal geometries found in nature—detail from “Beneath my Lawn,” 2018 (polylactic acid filament, 8’ round)

The twin side of the ontological bent in my art practice is an interest in phenomenology. I am intrigued by the idea that everything we know, we know only through the lens of our perceptions and experience. I engage the senses in my work by creating tactile pieces, using sound that is immersive, or creating effects that slightly confuse the eyes. I also opt for using video because looking through the lens of the camera is representative of how we look in general, through a lens inside our eyes. A video or any kind of projection is inherently the representation of something, not the thing itself. I portray organic forms, formations and topographies that are recognizable as such, but at the same time, are clearly abstracted and imaginary, emphasizing that they are the product of a mental construct.

The interconnection between the material and cognitive is significant in my work. Popular historian Yuval Noah Harari explained in a recent book that human existence dwells in two realities—the one we experience as participants in the material world, and the other we experience only cognitively.⁶ He explains that, in the beginning, humans lived in small groups and behaved not much differently from other types of animals. At some point, humans developed the cognitive ability to create fictions. This new ability led to the creation of collective fictions, such as the belief in gods and nation-states. This enabled humans to organize in much larger numbers, increase their population, and extend their reach, leading them to the agricultural revolution and the age of science. Since the cognitive revolution, as

⁶ See Harari, Yuval N. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Harper Perennial, 2015.

Harari calls it, humans have had to navigate not just the natural world, but also the world of collective fictions, in order to survive.

My artwork draws attention to the construed nature of our understandings and experiences of the world. It also draws attention to the fact that these understandings and the material world itself are always changing. The title of my thesis exhibition—*Marks of Existence*—indicates that the forms displayed are marks, like a drawing, something created by a human, even though they may appear as plausible objects or organic forms. The title also quotes the Buddhist notion that all phenomenological existence is premised on three marks: impermanence, absence of self, and suffering. This notion ties in with other philosophies emphasizing the idea of “becoming” over “being.” In ancient Greece, Heraclitus famously said that a person never bathes in the same river twice, because every time the river has changed and so has the person, as everything is always in flux. *Almost* portrays a form that is continuously evolving and devolving each time with slight variations. *At this Moment* portrays an ephemeral formation of nets made up of filament and shadows that continuously sway and rotate gently with the air currents in the room. They both have an appealing aesthetic that is, at the same time, critter-like. They blur the boundaries between the real and imaginary and gesture a sense of impermanence, becoming, and dissatisfaction. Viewers often attach more than one interpretation to the work, finding it difficult to pin it down, engaging with an unstable source of meaning and subjectivity.

My focus on our fluid constructions of the material and cognitive worlds stems perhaps from aspects of my personal life experience. I am the product of a transnational family and live in between cultures—that mental and emotional hybrid

“third space” of the immigrants that Homi Bhabha has so eloquently exposed in his writings.⁷ Each culture construes the material and cognitive worlds in unique ways. When you live in between two or more cultures, you are forced to navigate multiple versions of the material and cognitive worlds, quickly realizing that these viewpoints are fabricated and circumstantial. Also, as a former lawyer, I am keenly aware that “truth” depends on how people characterize facts; and what rules become effective, depends on the socio-political and economic motivations of a group, not any sort of immutable truth.

In line with Timothy Morton, I believe the universe is a single, infinite totality—a mesh that entangles all humans, all beings, and all things.⁸ I believe this mesh also entangles all that is immaterial—our collective fictions, individual imaginings, and all subjectivity. The universe is the ultimate grid. And everything in it is always changing. The labor intensive, non-mechanical repetition of tests, marks, layers and forms in my art practice echoes the labor of daily life and creates a temporary ritual of sorts that goes beyond just the actions and materials. It taps into quotidian motions and materials hoping to grasp small understandings of this ineffable, large, fluid, and infinite grid.

In all, my art practice is about trusting that my intuitive, gestural, laborious and repetitive multidisciplinary manipulation of everyday materials will, to borrow John Keats’ words, unweave a rainbow, clip an angel’s wings, and conquer mysteries

⁷ See Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.

⁸ See Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Mass. Harvard University Press, 2010.

by rule and line.⁹ For a while, I tried to attach specific narratives and locations to each of my art pieces, but it always felt like trying to stick post-it notes on them. Soon enough, the notes would fall to the ground. I have now, instead, become comfortable with the abstract nature of my artwork. Rather than explain the workings of the universe, I prefer to dwell in the mysteries and allow for fluid possibilities of meaning and subjectivity.

⁹ See Keats, John. *John Keats*. Edited by Susan J. Wolfson. Pearson and Longman, 2007.

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