



## Main Space

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### **Woven – Objects, Materials and Space(s) Beyond Measure**

September 24, 2021 - November 6, 2021

*Woven – Objects, Materials and Space(s) Beyond Measure* is a craft-based project that investigates material kinship and body awareness. How do we use our body as a tool to understand the world around us? Where do the lines of our body and the lines of the material begin and end? This exhibition will work through material play and sisterhood. These works will be constructed with a combination of traditional and unorthodox material and weaving techniques in relation to T'karonto/Toronto. Through collaborating, Kristi Chen, Akash Inbakumar, Leelay Aikawa and material(s) engage in worlding a future that blurs the lines between the human body, material, soil and process.

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“The first cultural device was probably a recipient .... Many theorizers feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier” - Ursula K Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory Of Fiction*

Throughout these breezy summer months past, my weaving kin, sisters Leelay and Akash came together to share, experiment and explore the concept of weaving while spending time in the lush, green parks of T'karonto. Building works collaboratively by

using foraged, found objects sourced from our own spaces became the beginning of *Woven*. By rekindling communal practices and passing one seed, thread or reed into the hands of different lives, experiences and generations, we learn, share, let go and grow...one weave and stitch at a time. The intuition and urgency of experimentation are the primary foundations that draw our works together. The water bucket slowly emptying itself, bundled fallen pine needles, and North American prairie grass wilting away are materials that are time based, speaking towards our intuitive nature of foraging and finding materials to create sculptural beings. Our collaboration is familial, as Akash, Leey and I feel as close as sisters as we world this exhibition together. From one to another, we've developed a kinship by passing knowledge through our own ancestral backgrounds and exchanging skills as we make.

*Leey stitching our blood line with red thread,*

*Akash felting fibers into fuzzy skin-like forms*

*Me plaiting a maple reed mat*

Woven, in my perspective, means to intertwine and to narrate. Using materials that are foraged, found, pre-made, has given us an opportunity to combine elements we each brought in and collaboratively create a narrative that commemorates our lived experiences. Utilizing elements of soil, water, plants, pre-manufactured materials and found objects questions what our position on this land is. What is *our* story?

These questions may not have definitive answers, but we instead seek to nurture an open-ended conversation. In this exhibition we are using techniques that are indigenous to our cultures by using materials sourced around us creating a trans-cultural experience. My sisters and I are settlers in T'karonto, therefore it is important to think about how we interpret our identities to acknowledge this geography. For example, as a

collective, we wanted to use materials and techniques that are easily accessible to our own resources and space. Using our hands to paint with mud, making baskets, foraging and felting are all additive techniques derived from ancient practices we personally resonate with. Basketry, especially for me, sits heavily in my lineage from many generations in the past. My paternal side of the family originates from Shouning, Fujian Province. This village/town has a vast history of basket weaving from utility to celebrations. Weaving symbolizes a sense of recultivation and survival, as my father is unable to weave. The action of me and my sisters weaving conveys strength and resilience to push forward sustaining inter-generational knowledge. Even the communal interactions of us sharing the same studio space, having meals together, talking, sharing, laughing are portraying a similar ambiance to a community in a village and reflected in these woven works. The skill of basketry and many other woven techniques are craft practices that are slowly diminishing in the hands of our contemporary world through mass industrialization and globalization. *Woven - Objects, Materials and Space(s) Beyond Measure* hopes to challenge this and explore the revival of familial techniques through sisterhood and togetherness.

- Kristi Chen

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***Staring at the shadows of the leaves breathing,  
whispering, and dancing to the dazzling sun one  
afternoon, I found my own spontaneous shadow woven  
into their authentic breathing rhythm.***

By being in touch with the wholeness of nature on a daily basis during the isolation forced by the pandemic, my desire to work with other artists became stronger, searching for ways in which artists suggest the oneness of a mutually thriving Earth Community. To me, finding my sisters Kristi, Akash and their work felt like intuitively finding my kin. I didn't feel any hesitation asking about them to work together even though we never really knew each other (Okay maybe a little). Co-creating with them symbolizes the union of our individual practices: basketry, weaving, ceramics, drawing, foraging and wood-working, addressing both individual freedom and community identity. Together, the project attempts to shift the notion of competition to collaboration while subtly echoing the biodiversity of forest-wellbeing, where everything thrives and works together.

Like many artists, collaboration was new to all three of us. It involved many activities such as writing this collective essay, discussing project themes, experimenting with backstrap weaving with a tree, and touching each other's hair like how sisters do. These are all part of kin-centric learning and care, and a pathway forward to healing from disconnectedness with each other and the environment. When Akash suggested that we should try weaving for our project, on the one hand I was excited, but on the other hand, I went through a mini anxious period wondering how I would contribute to the team with craft of weaving, and still express who I am in my work since I had no formal weaving experience in a traditional sense prior. When we got accepted to the Xpace summer residency program, I didn't stop my routine, – I continued paying a visit to nature on a regular basis and foraging during my walks. With the project *Woven* in mind though, I started to question why weaving has thrived in almost every culture, such as Peru, Guatemala, Ghana and especially within non-european communities throughout history in relation to their connection to the land. This question has navigated me through overly digitized (zoom-ed) culture and ecological devastation we witness today.

I started to pay more attention to how nature does the weaving during my walks in the forest. Staring at the shadows of the leaves breathing, and dancing to the dazzling sun one afternoon, I found my own spontaneous shadow woven into their authentic breathing rhythm with no separation from the environment. My senses stimulated and awareness heightened, I showed up fully to the whispering energy of trees and plants. It was this interlaced dimension of here and now in which I experienced the beautifully integrated tension of care from the Earth, an inspiration for *Woven*. I began to see weaving beyond technicality but rather as breathing, reconnection with Earth, and even as a way to rediscover inner self.

Through this framework, I connect weaving with my interest in yogic philosophy and my ongoing intention to find harmony between polarities. As a practicing yogi and a yoga teacher, this could be balancing the right and left sides of my body through asana (physical) poses. This could be inhaling and exhaling evenly or uniting the body, mind, and spirit. This could also be about balancing of masculine (yang, sun) and feminine (yin, moon) energy. This points to a sisterhood with Akash and Kristi, which meant for me to re-channel a wavering feminine energy within myself. Born to modernity, our society tends to promote the act of 'doing' and value productivity over passivity, which makes us unbalanced and separated both mentally and spiritually as a result of overly increased masculine (yang) energy. Over-dominated by yang-masculine energy in my female body, I find it subconsciously nurturing to work through sisterhood and Mother nature in relation to craft.

Similarly, working with a traditional tool such as the Japanese saw, which cuts with 'pull,' rather than 'push' reminds me to slow down and be in alignment with the rhythm of the Earth. This is again a feminine gesture informed by what may be traditionally known as a man's tool. The saw also becomes an extension of my arm, which transcends my body, tool, and the material, allowing the agency of the tool to take part. It is nostalgic working this way, reenacting something long forgotten within me.

These historical craft processes have been what raise my five senses in the present moment, awakening me to rethink my relationship to the world and materials:

**Touch:** I cut my hands so many times through touching woods or the sharp leaves, but I was saved by the springy textural essence of dog hair.

**Smell:** It was the aromatic smell of the pine needles that enticed me in the duration.

**Sight:** I rested my eyes peacefully on the gently moving silvergrass, and that was all I needed to do to find my sense of whole.

**Taste:** Sometimes we shared green tea, from which we painted a corner of the wall, now showing me the subtle colour of my culture.

**Sound:** I can now recognize *Sorghastrum nutans* by the plasticky sound they permeate when shaken against a tree.

I will never be able to see these materials as a mere object, because I now worked with them and this is *Woven* to me, expressing oneness of warp and weft, oneness of time and space, oneness of past, present and future, oneness of human and non-human, oneness of my consciousness and that of materials, oneness of body, mind and spirit.

I am just left with one question now: whether we explored weaving through sisterhood, material play and body awareness or if we actually explored sisterhood and material kinship, and body through weaving? Without any one answer, I know that all these experiences are woven into a new understanding that I am still in the process of weaving who I am as a person, as an individual, as a collective being and as a responsible member of the Earth community. This is *Woven* beyond measure.

Weaving who I am as a person through:

*Pineneedle hanging* (2021)

Open the third eye (decalcify pineal gland) by hanging this piece at a place where you see it everyday.

*Dog hair day* (2021)

Collect dog hair from the park and 'weave' them with the branches. Use a piece of tall grass to gently push through to see them bounce back.

*Braiding kin* (2021)

-Cut 3 inches of your hair and your kin's to weave them together with tall grass to honor the land which you stand on, as well as to honor where you come from.

- Leeay Aikawa

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Kinship is relating to others beyond the ties of genetics and blood for mutual survival. *Woven: Objects, Materials and Space(s) Beyond Measure*, explores the relations between Kristi, Leeay, myself and the surroundings we occupy through migration and settler structures. Us three sisters call T'karonto (Dish with One Spoon treaty territory<sup>1</sup>) home, here we foraged and sourced raw materials, found and bought objects or had things shipped in. By working with these materials and using craft methodology/processes/theory, we are able to conceive object-kin that represent the partnerships of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://circlesforreconciliation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Respect-Trust-Treaties-Reconciliation.pdf>  
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/a-dish-with-one-spoon>

the material ecosystem in T'karonto and ourselves both collaboratively and independently.

In this project we propose a future of partnerships between soil, plants and critters along with plastics, refined metals and imported goods, from other lands. These partnerships call for a speculative-future to embody these symbiotic relationships that are currently strained. We are often taught that 'un-natural' materials have no place being with or near 'natural' material, and yet when you look around T'karonto, they often occupy the same spaces. Collections of people's old belongings curbside are sprawled out next to the grasses and flowers growing out of the cracks in the sidewalk, plastics used to send packaging or serve us food are nestled and grouped in the spaces between the reeds, blown together by the wind. This leads us to envision new ways to work with multiple materials and apply craft processes such as weaving, stitching, knotting, basketry, woodworking, and felting to bring them together. To birth/conceive objects and narratives for a speculative-future, that is contextualized by the present and past.

Craft as care is a conceptual pillar to this project. Crafting is a full body experience- a repetitive task; it requires a reaching towards from the hands of the maker and the material. This meeting asks that both come to the table as equals, ready to learn, teach and desire. Crafting as worlding<sup>2</sup> reveals labour as more than the production of objects, instead understanding crafting as transformation, conception, stories, touch, symbiosis, care and kinship. Worlding through craft dismantles the human from the center and instead reframes us in the web of ecology. What can I do for this material and what can they do for me? How did we come to meet one another? What threads connect us, intersect, weave in and out? How does our coming together, ripple into our shared

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<sup>2</sup> Worlding - The concept of Worlding was introduced to me in Donna Harraway's book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Worlding to me is about creating imaginative worlds that can be tools to understanding our present reality.



surroundings and future? Like a game of cat's cradle, we work together to create new shapes and forms, always reaching towards new configurations.

This collaboration has allowed me to begin my reconnection to local ecology. Local ecology being where we sourced our material. For me, what is important to understand is that the local ecology of T'karonto has invasive species; plastics and other travelers are also threads in this web. Their presence in *Woven* is an acknowledgement to the travelers in T'karonto. For me acknowledging them is to recognize that I too come from a family of travelers, immigrations supervised by, and compelled by colonial structures. For my family it was leaving Sri Lanka, colonized by Portugal, Netherlands and Great Britain, and coming to Canada with the prospect of financial prosperity and stability. Even before my parents and grandparents were born, it was already robbed from the island and its people, and finally when the colonists left, internal war began. For travellers, some shops here supply goods that can allow them to connect to a far but familiar land or that some of the recipes have changed to acknowledge the land we/they stand on and the resources it provides.

By sharing stories with each other during the collaboration, Kristi, Leeyay and I became implicated to each other's practices, techniques, and lineages. How we carry ourselves in our independent practices were informed by our life experiences, personal philosophies, and interests. Our independence was the compost for nourishing kinship/collaboration/sisterhood. I re-learned how to work more intuitively with material, even materials that I have worked with for many projects and had built strong relationships with. At times, it was like dancing with someone new, and other times an old friend with new music, and having my sisters, Kristi and Leeyay, help me when I stepped on someone's toes. Often when using wool roving, I try wet felting it into a solid piece of felt, dense and opaque, to then manipulate that sheet. In *Black Pond* I used the wool roving without wet felting it, rather using it as loose hair only needle felting it to the circle to attach it, allowing the hairs to react to those around it. This was inspired by Leeyay's way of working with materials' innate characteristics which can be seen in *Dog*

*Hair Day*, a collage of found and foraged objects that interact with one another and balance without changing each other's physical form. Kristi's basket work inspired my exploration with creating a net with rope, which has been a partner in my making for 5 years and continues to be a symbolic material in my practice. Yet this time I played with the idea of lace and played with the idea of transparency as I often weave the rope into dense fabric not leaving open space to see through the material. Kinship, sisterhood, relationing is bumpy yet we still keep reaching towards, a mutual caring for one another.

Weaving as acts of crafting and interlaying ideas, materials and bodies becomes the metaphor in which I describe this ecology of kinship that I participated in during this collaboration. Materials, techniques, stories told, meals shared, hugs, phone calls, all individual threads woven into the fabric of ecology. All working together to make a physical and mental time-space that sustains one another. Cloth is a powerful hybrid creature, it is the intersection of many tiny threads living symbiotically together to make one.

Kristi, Leelay and I, bodies that share both immigration (me a child of immigrants) and settler contexts, local ecology still reach towards us, to continue their teachings. It is the question of how we reach back towards it, towards T'karonto, and how we come into ourselves by reaching towards each other, that we developed *Woven - Objects, Materials, and Space(s) Beyond Measure*.

- Akash Inbakumar

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