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Mending the Craft: Sustainability in Contemporary Textiles curated by Cecily Ou

Holly Chang, Leah Defoort, Allie Davis, and Callie Legault

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In September 2022, I supervised the installation of an exhibition at a small gallery in Toronto. I had stepped into a role that provided a new vantage point to the standard practices of exhibition cycles in the visual arts. Tasked with runs to Home Depots, media equipment centres, and paint suppliers, I compiled a list of items required for the exhibition: projector, monitors, paints, steel rods, HDMI cables, media players, AV cables, USBs, wall brackets, wall vinyls, wooden frames, track lights, and countless nails, magnets, staples, and tape. Installation aside, I also accounted for the materials utilized in the exhibited artworks, rolls of paper, inks, fabric, rubber, wood, cameras, graphite, paints. It was while— pacing up and down the aisles of a home improvement store— when I began to understand the environmental costs of my line of work.

As an emerging curator and textile practitioner, I understand the inherent need for materials in the creation and installation process. However, I rarely stopped to examine the ecological impact of the projects I encounter or produce. When forming exhibitions or artworks, so few take the initiative to account for their material use and fewer will reflect on the significance of it.

With this in mind, what kind of relationship can we say exists between contemporary art and sustainability today? Do artists and curators respond to the environmental costs of art production and display, and if so, how effective are these responses?

Up to this point in my career, these are questions I have never heard aloud.

Mending the Craft: Sustainability and Contemporary Textiles is a case study that responds to this line of inquiry. It is a focused examination on contemporary textile art production with works that not only speak of sustainability but consciously incorporate sustainable practices. Land and ecology are understood to be crucial to each artist's studio practice, at times explicitly through aesthetic means and other times, simply through a conscious use of materials; from botanical patterns to the literal use of local plants, the exhibited works meditate on the role of the environment in the life cycle of textile arts from beginning to end— from plant to dyes, dyes to cloth, cloth to garment, garment to installation, and its many subsequent iterations.

Holly Chang, Leah Defoort, Allie Davis, and Callie Legault propose a range of strategies that challenge the sanctity of the polished art object within the 'white cube'; their works are framed as a series of processes which respond to and counter the environmental impact of their artistic practices.¹ In effect, the art object is subject to various questions and environmental concerns. To begin, one might ask: *How are the artworks made? How were the materials sourced? How will these artworks live on after its display?* By prompting such questions, the exhibition accounts for visitors as active participants, and in a sense, active agents of choice and possible change. Above all, the artists create space to reflect upon the environmental costs of material use in the visual arts and envision sustainable forms of art production.

Leah Defoort's work is an investigation into weeds and plants found in Oakville, ON to harness their textile dye potential. *Gather: Oakville Plants on Textiles* (2022) is an accumulation of extensive research and experimentation with the likes of Queen's Anne's

¹ The 'white cube' is a term coined by the art theorist Brian O'Doherty to refer to early twentieth century adaptation of white walls in art institutions to minimize distraction. O'Doherty problematizes the white cube and argues that it isolates artworks from its context and consequence.

lace and hickory nuts to produce a series of screen-printed textiles echoing the forms of twelve foraged plants.² Defoort's *Natural Dye Research Cards* are shown alongside the printed samples, explicitly illustrating the necessity of intensive material processes used in the development of a sustainable art practice. Her work demonstrates an explicit link between local ecology and her textile production, the latter of which could not exist without the former.

Ghost (2022), a work by Holly Chang, continues Defoort's exploration of natural dyes. Her oversized patchwork pants are the results of an artist residency at the Banff Centre for Arts. Constructed from a series of samples and recycled cloth, Chang considers material use in her creation process and consciously transforms existing samples into a new artistic entity. Suspended over a trail of soil, the pomegranate, walnut, and chestnut-dyed pants are accompanied by a bronze-casted foot—modelled after the artist's own; trace of the artist's body acts as a reminder of her positionality to the land on which she creates, contextualising her practice within its ecological impact.

Callie Legault's work, *Untitled* (2023) situates the ecological impact of the artist's practice differently. From fibre to thread to garment, she constructs an image of garment production to consider its expanded material process and the standard life cycle of garments. Remarkably, this process can also be read backward; Legault's use of recycled garments and yarn complicates the often-linear lives of textiles and presents new possibilities for existing materials. Transforming used yarn and thread into fibre and back again into garments, this work aims to unravel misconceptions regarding the limits of textile materials. In a way, Legault defies the assumed environmental harm of garment production and provides a revised ecological sentence to existing materials.

Similarly, Allie Davis's work challenges the life expectancy of textile art. *Teaching sample* (2021-22) is a piece of fast fashion mended using a Japanese embroidery method referred to as *sashiko* or *boro*, in which the simple running stitch is used to create intricate

² Other weeds and plant include, red pine, sumac, goldenrod, Black-Eyed Susan, Buckthorn Berry, European Common Reed, Jewelweed, Grey Dogwood Berry, black walnut, and Curly Dock.

patterns. Davis's careful stitchwork is echoed in her *Patchwork-in-Progress* (2023), made from naturally dyed recycled cloth and reinforced and decorated using *sashiko*.³ Both works are presented in a stage of flux and change, subject to further mending and alterations to reimagine and extend the possibilities of the textiles. The artist's education-oriented approach encourages a natural curiosity in her material process, reaching outwards from the work to inspire engagement.

Dyeing, patching, spinning, or stitching, the artists of *Mending the Craft: Sustainability and Contemporary Textiles* presents a series of actions to challenge the environmental harm of standard practices in contemporary textile arts— and broadly, contemporary visual arts. Their strategies are not large in scope, instead focused on individual impact and educational potential. Leah Defoort expanded my understanding of local ecology and natural dyes; my eyes now scan the plants along sidewalks for Queen Anne's lace and goldenrod to harvest for dyes. Holly Chang changed my perception of research materials, shedding new light on dye-cloth and knit samples in my research binders. Callie Legault taught me to push beyond the perceived limits of materials and inspired a new interest in spinning yarn from old fibres. Allie Davis introduced the art of *sashiko* and the idea of the ever-evolving cloth, which I incorporate into my day-to-day mending and work; the exhibited works are opportunities for conversations, exchange, and a collective transference of knowledge— from practitioner to practitioner, from practitioner to viewer and importantly, from viewer to viewer.

- Cecily Ou

³ *Sashiko*, along with various other techniques such as *shibori* and indigo dye, incorporate Japanese philosophies associated with repair and care for materials to extend its life cycle and develop an appreciation for resources extracted from land on which one is situated. Davis's work borrows these techniques and embraces its respective philosophies.