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Undulations of Memory

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Lauryn Alissa Smith

Committee in charge:

Professor Monique van Genderen, Chair

Professor Lisa Cartwright

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2021

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The thesis of Lauryn Alissa Smith is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego
2021

DEDICATION

To my parents, Susan and Glenn, who support and encourage me endlessly, and who believe in me when I don't believe in myself.

To my partner, Adrian, who makes me laugh countless times every day, even when I don't want to.

To my Grandma Connie, who taught me to sew, and has always encouraged my creative endeavors.

To my Grandma Gloria, who I hope is following along from beyond.

To my best friend, Kylie, who always makes me feel like a superstar.

To the rest of my friends and family who encouraged me in too many ways to say over the years.

EPIGRAPH

The blue of distance comes with time, with the discovery of melancholy, of loss, the texture of longing, of the complexity of the terrain we traverse, and with the years of travel.

Rebecca Solnit

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Undulations of Memory

By

Lauryn Alissa Smith

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Monique van Genderen, Chair

Undulations of Memory is an MFA thesis exhibition of the recent work of Lauryn Smith. It consists of one large textile sculpture, *Wave*. The work explores the artist's relationship to nature, water, memory, and movement through craft and the material practices of sewing and dyeing. *Wave* is built of memory— memories of experience, memories of shape, memories of the hand, of its submersions, of feelings and sounds, of ways of being.

Jumping in

I jump off a dock into the lake. The water is cold, shocking my skin into tiny bumps, the hairs on my arms and legs lifting in surprise. My eyes close as I move downward through the water. Bubbles fizzle up around me brushing past my body in a scramble towards the surface. I let myself sink deeper, deeper. Little fish scatter away from this sudden intrusion. The water feels thick with minerals. When I'm done sinking, I blow air out of my nose and push forward and through. I can see sunlight through my eyelids as I get closer to the surface. I pop my head out and take a deep breath. I stand on the rocky bottom and face the shore, throwing my body back and into the water again, enjoying the lightness of my limbs, the buoyancy of body and spirit I feel here.

A different time and place— my feet scrape across the sandy bottom of the Pacific to warn off stingrays as I enter the water. Waves push into my legs and threaten to knock me over. Water explodes into bubbles over my body. Massive and heavy, the swell knocks into me with easy power. I move forward slowly, carefully, looking towards the horizon. A large wave threatens to crash on me, I jump over it and into the surf, hands breaking the way for my head and the rest of my body. I come above the surface and breathe, lick the salt off my lips and swim forward. I move all around as I float, looking in every direction for danger or obstacle. Adrenaline pushes through my limbs and makes me jumpy and excited. I watch the incoming waves, not turning my back on them for too long.

Wave

Walking into UC San Diego's SME gallery, the viewer can see a large textile work, *Wave*, hanging horizontally in the space. The work is made up of two pieces, split in the middle, so that the viewer can walk all the way around the edges of the gallery and then between the two. Depending on the time of day the viewer enters the gallery, they will be confronted with a different perspective of the work, which changes in height and orientation in accordance with a tidal chart. The two pieces work together to form the crest of a wave. The center of this point is the position in which the viewer can stand, immersed within the movement of a hand-made tide.

The pieces in the gallery are made of silk chiffon, which is light and semi-transparent. They fade in color from a deep, rich blue to a silvery gray. Each piece is drawn with many seams that form simple lines which ripple horizontally across the work's surface. The seams are pintucks that create gentle folds of texture along the underside of the work. Each seam is sewn with vibrant green threads, which tangle and gather in places, reminiscent of seagrass floating on the surface of water and gently hanging into the depths. These threads sometimes form large clumps or smaller tangles, looking as if they might wrap around fingers or ankles.

The two panels that make up the work are supported at either end by a thin metal rod which is inserted through a channel. The rod holds the fabric in a rigid line at either end as the works hang from the ceiling. The rigidity of the textile falls away as it collapses towards the floor and swoops in large arcs along either side.

The chiffon is hand-dyed, with imperfections and mottled color irregularities spreading throughout as the piece transitions from blue to gray. These changes become more and less visible throughout the day, as the light from the wall of windows to the right of the gallery changes and shifts.



Figure 1: *Wave*, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021.



Figure 2: *Wave* detail, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021.



Figure 3: *Wave* detail, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021.

Making

Sculpture is an art practice directly related to the body. In the making of a sculpture, the body is moving around and among the work as it is produced. With materials and against them, hands and arms manipulate, stretch, cut, wind, and build. After its manufacture, the sculpture exists with our bodies in the same dimension. It is not understood to be flat like a drawing or painting, but rather it exists in space just like we do. To make sculpture, one must move and wrestle.

In my sculptural practice I manufacture form from fabric. Though sewing might seem to be a gentler version of sculpture, it is, in fact, physically demanding. I am constantly moving from standing to sitting at my machine, laying things out, folding, unfolding, stretching, inspecting details, and hanging things up. Many people unfamiliar with how sewing works imagine it to be quite easy when done by machine, as if this tool somehow removes the body. There are, in fact, many differences between hand-sewing and machine-sewing, and there are different practical applications for both. The sewing machine is mainly a mechanical tool. It requires complete attention and control over numerous settings as well as physical control over the machine itself. Sewing by machine is actually very similar to driving a car. Although the body movements and coordination become automatic through time and experience, these movements still require most of the driver's attention. Similarly, a sewist must "steer" the machine with precision and care.

Sewing machines are uniquely related to the body. Their operation requires the coordinated orchestration of hands, eyes, and feet to operate. Some parts of the machine are even named for the human body: the presser "foot," the "arm" of the machine, the "eye" of the needle, the "throat" plate. As a sewist, the sewing machine becomes an extension of my body. My arm

connects to controls, hands feed and manipulate fabric, my foot presses against the pedal, the bend in my ankle adjusts speed. Human body hunches over machine body.

Though there is a fluidity to the communications between sewist and machine, this dance is also choreographed, or at least rehearsed, so that muscle memory takes control. Instructions, sketches, and patterns map out the construction of various textile creations. These guidelines are altered to adjust the final outcome— changes and alterations are made along the way.

A part of my practice is sketching. Usually, I will visualize a potential work, or maybe just part of one, like the way something drapes or relates to the wall or ground. Following this I will try to solve any potential problems and strategize installation through imagining various possibilities, issues, and solutions. Finally, before construction, I make several sketches. My sketching process is hardly refined— instead it is rough and quick. These loose drawings serve as notes. Similar to my sloppy handwriting, these sketches might not be easily legible to people other than myself. This short-hand method, however, helps me better visualize the objects before I make them, and to further troubleshoot their production. In conjunction with the sketches, I provide notes and annotations highlighting certain sections of the work or things that are difficult to describe through drawing. In sewing, key decisions must be made ahead of time through planning; sketches, instructions, and notes provide these plans.

Despite meticulous planning, the result, however, is often experimental, as layouts on paper or in my head rarely look exactly as they will in fabric. Unexpected things come up. Gravity works differently than I think it will, fabric weighs more, the air moves less. For example, once I discovered that it wasn't air currents that moved a piece like I expected, but actually was static electricity, which was pulling the work towards the viewer as they walked by.

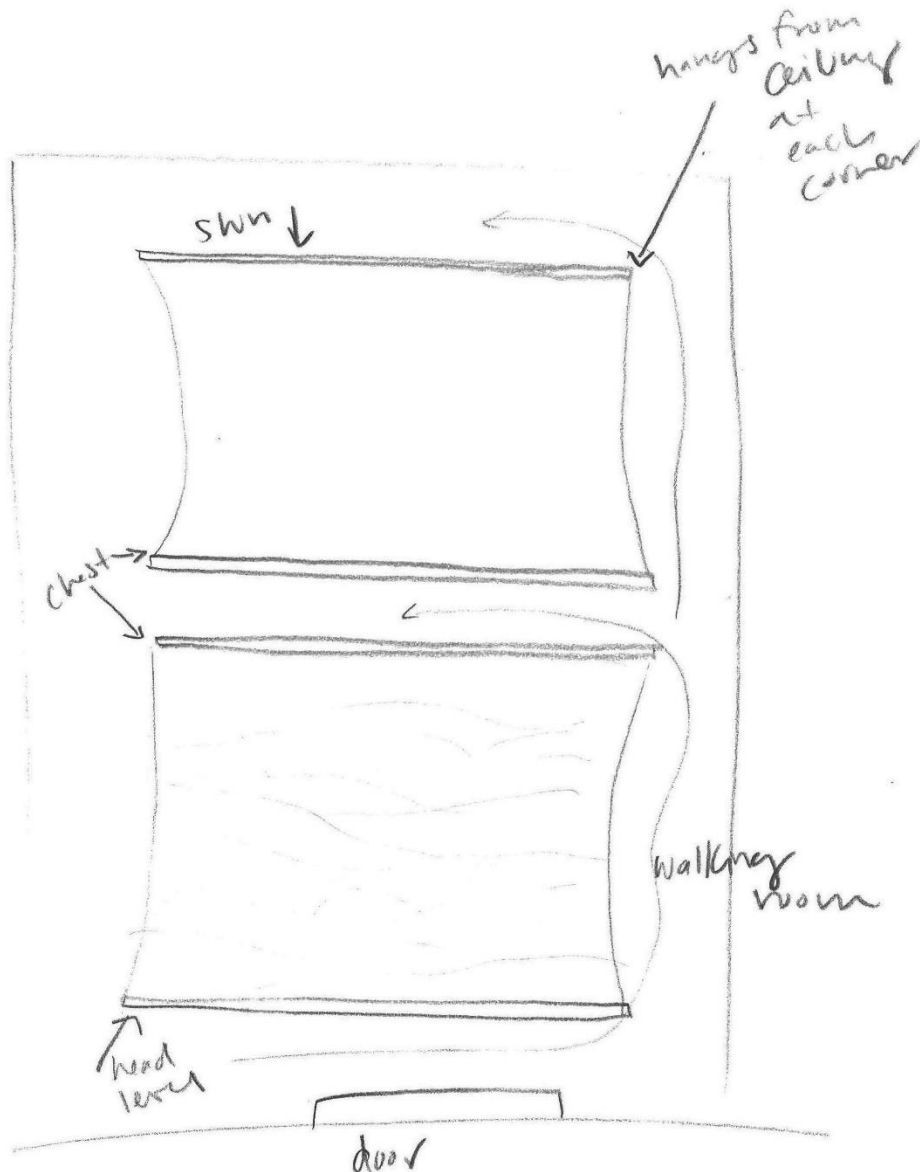


Figure 4: Early concept sketch for *Wave*.

These small discrepancies are part of working with materials as collaborative partners. I do not try to force my materials to do something they cannot do. I prefer to work *with* materials, embracing fabric's complex and unpredictable nature, planning what I can, and inviting other possibilities as well. These differences can at times enhance a work more towards my intended concept than my original sketches did, after all.

Material Process and History

In the past year and a half, I have shifted from using stable cotton to working with slippery and unwieldy chiffon. I am drawn to chiffon for its transparency, the way it can hold color and still be see-through, which accentuates the construction of the work, specifically the seams. In using this material, I have had to address practical problems that didn't exist for me before, like seam finishes. My hobby of sewing clothing has allowed me to become familiar with numerous seam finishes that are useful for constructing pieces with fabrics like chiffon that are prone to unravelling. At first, I approached working with this fabric from the point of view of a quilter: I had no experience in finishing seams (when quilting, the raw edges of seams are ultimately encased in the final product, and since the piece will not be washed or strained as much as clothing, and quilting cotton is tightly woven, the risk of unravelling is not as significant.) In my exploration of practical finishes for a more challenging material, I have found a new method to work with in *Wave*.

In *Wave*, I am using large panels of fabric as whole pieces, not cutting into them at all and therefore not using a seam finish of any kind. Instead of cutting pieces out, rearranging, and piecing them together as would be done in a traditional quilt, I worked with the fabric as a flat shape on the ground and pinched sections together, sewing one arched line at a time to create a seam-like fold in the fabric. These folds are similar to pin-tucks (a technique common in garment-making) but are curved and intentionally less precise. Along the curves, the folded fabric ripples, adding to the aqueous texture of the piece. Through this method, I am able to form more organic and curving shapes than I would be able to through piece-work. I also eliminate the issue of seam finishes all-together. Additionally, I think this new technique brings into question the quilting histories I had been working with previously.

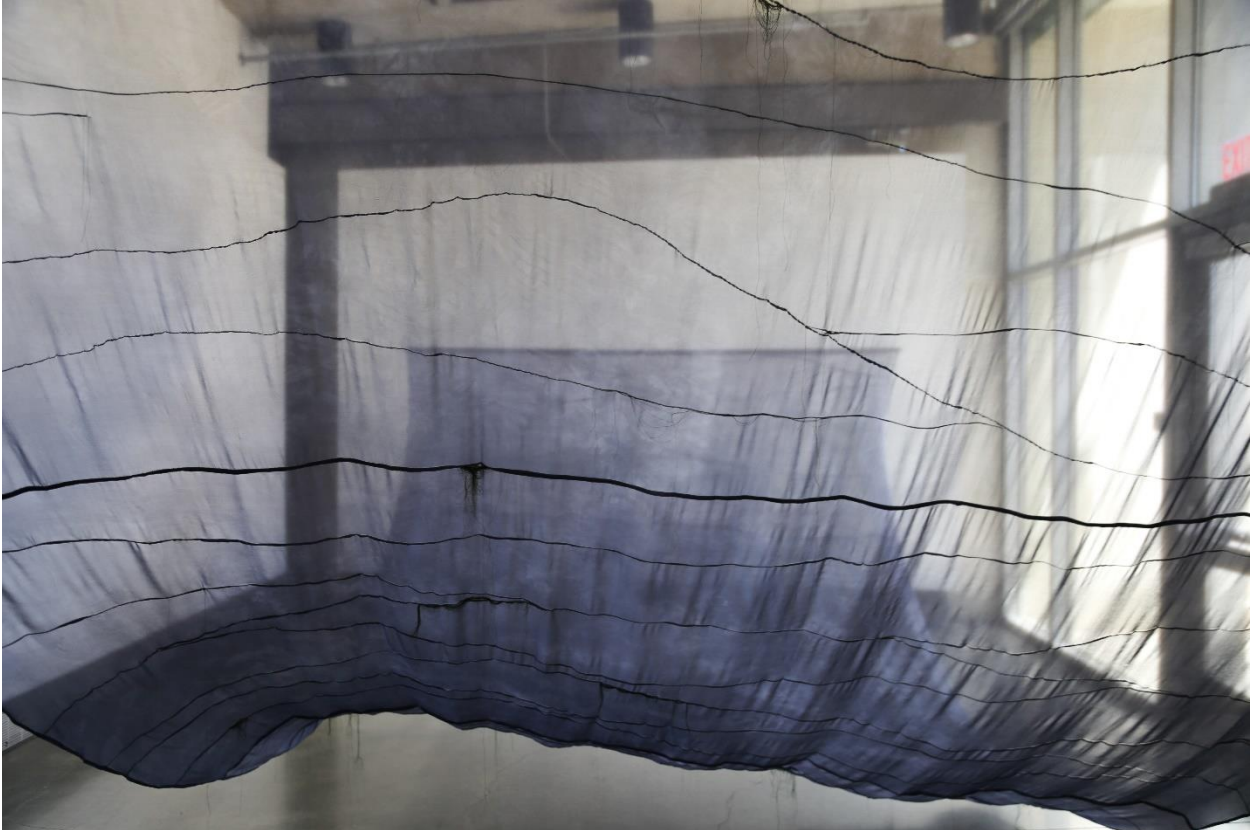


Figure 5: *Wave* detail, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021.

Quilting has a long and complex history. The act of piecing small patches of fabric together into a larger format to make a quilt was born of necessity. When a family did not have access to large pieces of fabric, or could not afford them, people used whatever was at hand to create larger swaths of material using strategic placement and stitching. The practice eventually gave rise to its own trends and traditions, and created a complex visual language. I have been considering my position within this tradition. For many of my pieces, I purchased large measures of fabric and cut them into smaller pieces to create a pattern through the newly sewn seams. In a way, this process felt disingenuous— I was cutting just for the sake of it. What might it mean to remove the step of cutting from my process? How might this change the dynamic between myself and the fabric, or between myself and the practice of quilt making historically? I'll begin with the fabric.

Can we consider the cutting of a piece of fabric as an act of violence? I have worked with this possibility before. In a piece from 2018, I sewed a quilt, and then cut it in half. The violence of this gesture was a central concept for the piece. Obviously if you were to do something similar, like take a shirt out of your closet and cut it down the middle, there is some violence in that gesture. You are likely ruining something that had use-value, and potentially some sort of sentimental or personal value as well— perhaps you just liked the shirt. But cutting a shirt or a quilt is obviously destructive, you are taking a functional thing and erasing that functionality. Fabric, of course, is a material— like paper, wood, or marble. In order to make something new, we reduce a whole into parts. The success of this is largely determined by planning.

There is something to be said of a well-articulated plan in sewing. I can have one square yard of fabric, lay a pattern on top of it, and strategically cut out pieces. After sewing them together, I can form a blouse, for example, something that the original fabric was not. Something new, and perhaps even, better, has been created, but does this do violence to the original length of material? There is, at the very least, a risk involved in the transformation, because, obviously, there is no going back once the fabric is cut. Perhaps it is the intention that determines violence. To cut for betterment or to cut for destruction. Through *Wave*, I am replacing the act of cutting with folding as drawing. To me, there is a gentleness about this substitution.

Folding rather than cutting might also affect the dynamic of this work in relation to the history of quilt piecing (something that has been fundamental in my practice) as well. In fact, what I'm doing in *Wave* isn't quilt piecing at all. Quilting has been foundational to my practice, but of late I have been moving further and further from what makes a quilt a quilt. This shift has been a methodical and conceptual exploration of the discipline. First, I removed the color (something usually found in quilts), using only seams to create pattern and form. Next, I took

away the batting and backing, making only a quilt top. To this I made alterations, cuts, openings, transparencies, ultimately using fabrics that have no relation at all to quilt-making, but are, instead, the staples of special occasion clothing (like chiffon). Now I have removed the act of piecing: I am, it seems, no longer making quilts at all.

I'm not sure these classifications are important, in the end, for how viewers will experience the work, since they will understand the pieces in whatever way they choose. It has, however, been an important shift for me in the way I am conceptualizing the work and its place within our contemporary context. My recent works could resemble curtains, quilts, room dividers, etc. They bear intimations of all, but are tied to the classification of none. Perhaps they are simply *sculpture*.

Moving Forward: *Field Study*

Field Study is a large textile sculpture which I made just before starting my work on *Wave*. In my second year at UCSD, I started experimenting with chiffon as a new material, which I explained above, and expanded my use of color from the monochromatic white pieces of my First Year show to include colors inspired by a natural landscape.

Just before I made *Field Study*, I made a different piece that ended up being transitional for my practice. This was the first piece I made using chiffon, and it is a perfect example of how serendipity often plays a role in my process. I was stuck on the idea of blue linen, something dark and purplish, that I would stitch together in monochromatic log cabin squares. I was on a time crunch before a critique and needed to get fabric from a local store. There was only one fabric store within my reach via bus and extensive walking, so my options were limited. I did not find what I was looking for, but instead, found something better. I became infatuated with a silk chiffon in the perfect hue of oceanic blue. It reminded me of the crashing waves of the Pacific and the transparency was actually much better for representing water than an opaque linen would have been. It was not a choice I had set out to make, but rather one that was made *for* me due to time and material limitations. This was an important material shift for me. I broke up with a connection to more traditional quilting materials and started working with fabric that would better play with the light and movement I needed to imagine the natural landscape.

The piece I made with this silk chiffon, though new for me in some ways, was still made with traditional quilt patterns. I was stuck on this connection to form and history and was trying to force the spiraling of the log cabin block to represent the spiraling of currents or whirlpools.

Ultimately, I needed to divorce myself not only from my material limitations in connection to quilting tradition, but also from the limitations of the pattern.



Figure 6: *Field Study*, chiffon, thread, copper tubing, 2021.

My serendipitous encounter with chiffon also represents an important element of my practice: working with my materials instead of against them. I allow processes and materials to guide me and to contribute to the work conceptually and physically. I start each project with an idea, but generally let it expand and contract through the process of making. This happens in almost all of my work and is an element in my practice that I find extremely rewarding.

The next piece I started, titled *Field Study*, would end up taking the rest of the school year to complete, only to sit uninstalled in a bin for over a year due to COVID-19 restrictions. I have imagined many possible installations for this work, and was finally able to see it completed

in our MFA group show *Measurements of Progress* at the San Diego Art Institute in Balboa Park.

My previous experiment with chiffon had left me wanting to explore the material further, so I ordered some samples of different colors and weaves online. I ended up finding a fabric called “two-tone chiffon” in which the warp threads were a different color than the weft. White and yellow threads weave together to create a sandy beige, and the special weave means that the fabric catches the light in extremely unique ways. It is somewhat transparent, and depending on whether I cut each rectangular piece that makes up the work on the grain or on the cross grain, the pieces actually look like different colors when next to one another in certain lighting situations.

In *Field Study* I was pushing the monochrome in as many ways as I could think— each textural element built off the last in mimicry of the many layers in a field of dry grass. The unfinished edges of each seam frayed uncontrollably and created yet another complex texture on one side of the work. I sewed with several different thread colors ranging from yellow to ochre to brown, alternating colors in the bobbin and the top spool of my sewing machine, so each seam was made of two differently colored stitches. Throughout the piece the rectangles change in size, growing from one end to the other, which also affects a viewer’s perception of color and perhaps gives a changing impression of distance.

All of these small details were my way of thinking about the complexity of something like a field of grass and the experience of standing within it. Each piece of grass is more or less the same color, and yet we see depth and texture and change in value because of light and distance and our body’s relationship to what we are looking at. With *Field Study*, I was taking

the elements of a textile: fabric, thread, straight-grain, cross-grain, size and shape of cuts, to create a shadow of what is happening in a natural landscape, not really a literal representation, but something close to it, something warped by abstraction.

Field Study hangs from the ceiling and is supported by a frame of copper tubing. The copper is flexible enough that I can easily bend and manipulate it to draw out the shape of the piece, which winds along the gallery in a serpentine manner. This winding allows the viewer many different viewpoints, one could become almost enveloped by the piece, they could walk along it, see it from a distance, or look at the profile from end-to-end. From each different position the work shifts, adding another element of texture. If installed elsewhere, the piece could take on a different shape, depending on the environment it is to be installed in. At SDAI, the work is stretched out under skylights, the only natural light in the space, which illuminates each rectangle and accentuates the subtle plays in color and texture.

Field Study was a big step in my progression towards *Wave*. It was through *Field Study* that I started to envision a work that pushed beyond the limits of traditional quilting form (though I was still working within a grid, the straight lines of which provide the framework for any quilt block.) With *Wave* I am getting even further away from my origin point. The organic patterns of *Wave* are sewn in tucks and folds, meaning I have moved away from both the geometry of the quilt as well as the process of cutting and piecing.

Craft

For quite a while I have been trying to navigate the strange liminal space between what we call “craft” and what we call “art.” The line that divides the two is often confusing, blurry, and misinterpreted. In general, people who are not involved with the arts seem to see the distinctions differently from those who are. For example, modern art is always a big problem for introductory art students to contend with. They don’t understand how something which apparently lacked great skill or craftsmanship or labor to make can pass as art. The “I could do that” problem is one which I have tackled many times in the classroom.

Recently a discussion among the sewing community on Instagram came up about whether people consider the clothing they sew themselves to be art. I sew clothing, and I sew for my art practice, and though I think the two practices feed on one another, they are different in my mind.

Within my art practice, I am free to experiment without functionality getting in the way. Sewing clothing, I can experiment with formal qualities without needing to address conceptual ones. When I sew myself a complex and beautiful garment there is no conceptual goal other than feeling amazing about what I’ve made and how I look in it.

Perhaps the issue of textile work often not being classified as fine art comes from our relationship with the material. We don’t all encounter oil paintings or marble every day, but we all interact with textiles constantly through our clothing, our bedding, our curtains, and cushions. When we do encounter textiles, there is comfortable familiarity. Something so normal does not feel alien enough to be art perhaps. When we encounter oil paints for example, it is exclusively in the context of paintings as art. There is an easy boundary here. Furthermore, when one speaks

of art, the shorthand example is painting. Since people are generally not exposed to art a lot, these easy definitions become standard. I have, however, also met resistance from other artists and art professors when trying to discuss my textile works. Again, the territory may be unfamiliar, but can the work not be addressed and analyzed like any other sculpture? Sure, many are unfamiliar with the techniques I'm using, but we often must deal with media we aren't proficient in. I can give feedback on a film despite not knowing the first thing about producing one.

Perhaps the bottom line is a combination of familiarity or lack thereof, and use-value. What makes a textile useful? When does it have a purpose? Even clothing is a combination of design and functionality. Thinking of quilting and its purpose, it is meant to be used as well as looked at. There is a practicality to a lot of quilting— piecing smaller swatches of fabric together to form a large surface. This makes use of scraps and ultimately gives the maker a large piece of fabric to work with. Quilts are also traditionally narrative by nature. There are patterns and symbols meant to represent different things and tell stories. Perhaps the more tenuous the object's connection to usefulness becomes, the closer it moves towards art. When something does nothing more than express something, it can finally not be craft.

My work, I think, strikes a balance between classifications. It is rooted in craft, in the history of it and the techniques essential to it. The work is exploring conceptual ideas, it is not meant to be “used” but rather experienced or observed. The work, to me, is both fine art and craft.

Color/Dye

Instead of sourcing colored chiffon for *Wave* like I did in *Field Study*, I decided I wanted to work with the color of the work more intimately, by dyeing the fabric myself. To do this I used a natural silk chiffon, and a process called Acid Dyeing. I used two different powdered dyes, one called “Blued Steel” and another called “Silver Gray.” Using these two colors, I was able to achieve a gradient from end to end of *Wave*, starting with a dark, rich navy, and fading to a light silvery gray.

In this gradation, I was considering the body’s position in relation to the ocean. How does our perception of the color of the waves change depending on where we are? When you are up high, looking down on the ocean and into the horizon, the water can seem gray, it looks cold and metallic with light shimmering off the surface. Up close we can see the blue of the water. The waves crash near us and we see turquoise, in the waves in the distance, navy. Floating on the surface of the water on a surfboard, the depths are definitely dark blue, not vibrant, but not dull either, rich and deep. All of this comes from water, something which itself has no color at all

Through the dyeing process, an element of serendipity entered the work. The chiffon is extremely lightweight, and when it gets wet, it sticks to itself. This translated to uneven color through the dye baths. This is actually something I love about dyeing my own fabric, especially with natural dyes, as I think the subtle variations in color lead to beautiful depth and texture. Initially, the splotchy color was too much for my liking. I decided to overdye the fabrics to try to get an effect similar to glazing in oil painting. Through this process I was dyeing each piece, letting it dry, and then re-dyeing it, not only to lessen the uneven color spots, but also to add a depth and richness to the tones I was achieving, and to hone in on the gradient and get it as

smooth as I could. In the end, the amount of splotching remaining in the fabric adds another textural element, behaving like reflections on the water or even like seafoam.



Figure 7: *Wave* detail, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021.

Vija Celmins has been a big inspiration for me in this work. I've been thinking about her drawings and prints of ocean waves, and the meditative quality they have about them. Her process is about as laborious and tedious as it gets. There is an element to my work that is about this tedium of labor, the rote production that goes into a large project once it has started. Like Celmins, my work is about the trace of the hand as it repeats movements and gestures throughout production.

In an interview for Art21, Celmins discusses painting the same image on top of itself over and over again, sanding it down when it wasn't quite right, and building it up again. She says

“Somehow I think that the image then begins to have a sort of memory in it, even if you can’t see it. It can build up a kind of a dense feeling toward the end.” (Celmins) The idea that there could be a secret memory stored in the work, something invisible but perhaps felt, is really intriguing to me. When I was building up the layers of dye on each panel of fabric, this is what I was imagining— a density that comes from the many immersions into dye each piece has experienced. In reality, the viewer probably cannot tell that the fabric has been built up numerous times, but I do believe that there is a richness added, some sort of trace, or memory of process.

Wave is built of memory. Memories of experience, memories of shape, memories of my hand, of its submersions, of feelings and sounds, of ways of being.

Nature

In my work I am considering and exploring my own connection with the natural world. Being outside gives me energy and perspective, and I'm not alone in this. Human's connection with nature goes beyond postcards and selfies with the Grand Canyon. We often think of the human habitat to be the city, the built world, but in terms of evolution, that is simply not true. We evolved spending huge amounts of time outdoors, and it has only been recently that we've moved inside. Not only is time outside good for our mental health, but it is essential to it. Our connection with the outdoors is not about cliched poetry, but about survival.

In my practice I am taking inspiration from the phenomenological experiences I have had in nature. I'm thinking not only about the visual representation of certain places or things, but also about the feelings I had while existing in a particular place or at a certain time. I'm not trying to recreate something, but to mimic its behavior, to impersonate a memory— something blurry at the edges.

I gain a lot of energy from experiencing the natural world (or as close to the concept of “natural” as one gets these days). I understand that human's relationship with nature is a complicated one, but ultimately, we need elements of the natural world to feel whole and to be well. This work is, in a way, exploring that feeling of being whole, the rejuvenative quality immersion in a natural environment can have on us, and the ways we can tap into those experiences later through memory.

I grew up in a rural place on the border of the Adirondack Park, in northern New York, surrounded by woods and fields and few houses or people; therefore, I was enveloped by nature most of the time. Looking out the windows of my childhood classrooms I could see dense pine

woods, occasional deer and sometimes a fox. I saw a bear from the school bus once, and as a small child I was often scared by the chatter and howls of coyotes in the backyard at night.

I distinctly remember one moment from my high school French class. It was late fall, and already snowing. I watched large flakes of snow drift downward. I noticed that depending on what I focused on, the snow as a whole, or an individual flake, the falling snow seemed to be moving overwhelmingly fast, or impossibly slow. I was taken with the beauty of this, the total simplicity of it. This moment represents to me the complexity of nature and our experience of it.

There is an easiness to the natural world, it goes on snowing, blowing in the wind, growing in the spring, regardless of whatever personal trouble or worries I might be experiencing. The moments in which I notice the complexities of nature in some small but significant way, are constantly imprinted on my memory, thoroughly grounding my personhood. They remind me of my values, of how small I am, how my life is just a blip in the universe, but also how easily my actions can cause an avalanche of consequences.

In *Wave*, I am reflecting on my long-standing relationship to bodies of water, and, specifically, lakes and the ocean. The Adirondack Park is sprinkled with many lakes; there were no less than four within a 30 minute drive of my house, one of which my maternal grandmother has lived on for the entire duration of my life. When I was a child, we rented a camp on the lake for a week every summer, and as a family we spent a lot of time swimming, kayaking, water skiing, fishing, and more. In fact, due to the COVID 19 pandemic, 2020 was the first year of my whole life in which I did not swim in Trout Lake since I didn't travel home in the summer.

Picturing my family on the lake together underscores my positive memories of my childhood. There is something very light and carefree about experiencing the pleasant warmth of

summer on the water in a place that is struck so aggressively by frigid winters six months a year. I've always felt comfortable in the water, preferring lakes to pools and being unable to resist a jump in the lake whenever I was around one. Moving to Southern California was a shift in landscape about as dramatic as one can get in the contiguous United States. Here most lakes are man-made reservoirs— no swimming allowed. The Pacific Ocean is, of course, available for water sports, however, as most people who did not grow up around the ocean can agree, the salty water of the Pacific is tumultuous, intimidating, and frightening compared to the smooth and mineral rich water of the northern New York lakes I'm accustomed to.

Though I feel nostalgic for my childhood home in the Adirondacks, my rosy outlook is colored through time and distance. As a teenager, I developed a deep sense of bitterness for the place I grew up. I felt trapped, smothered by the smallness of the town, the nosiness of the people, and the catty grade-school gossip that spread among kids and adults alike. I appreciate my hometown for its natural beauty and the landscape, however, I also resent it in many ways.

It is difficult to feel this way about the place I spent my whole childhood, the place my parents still live. I love them and my other family members who live there, so the anger I feel must somehow be tempered. Therefore, I have grown to appreciate, now as an adult even more than as a child, the intricate and baroque details of the natural environment, and their specificity as they contrast with the details of this new place I live in Southern California.

Something about the fierceness of the season changes from summer to winter and back, the way fall and spring barely exist, feels fitting in the dichotomy of emotions I feel towards home. I have seen -40 degrees Fahrenheit in winter, -20 was common growing up. School was only cancelled for the cold weather if the temperature was -25 or below, that was when the

school bus engines would no longer start—a temperature that empties your lungs when you step outside and freezes the moisture on your nostril hairs. It usually snows at least once in May, several times in April and October. June, July, August, and September are safe. July and August often hit 90 degree spikes or higher. This place with a yearly temperature range of up to 130 degrees feels violent. As the winter finally melts away, summer explodes like a tropical jungle, the plant life scrambling to grow within their short window of ideal conditions. Rain frequently waters the plants, tending carefully to a rich spectrum of vibrant greens. Thunderstorms and wind in summer sometimes rip through for hours, sometimes just minutes, breaking into warm sunshine.

The seasons in San Diego are undoubtedly more subtle. The shift between them is long and gentle. All year long plants take turns flowering. Tan is more common than green. The greens I do see here are drab, army colored, tones of olive and blue-gray. The plants aren't typically leafy, they are sharp and hard, conditioned for a different environment. The air carries moisture differently. It is dry in the daytime, and not merely humid at night, but wet, as the ocean breeze moves inland. Riding my bike through the marine layer is like swimming in cold water. 60 degrees makes my nose red and chills me through. 60 degrees is t-shirt weather in New York.

Since moving to San Diego to begin my graduate studies, the differences between these two places have become more central in my thinking, which has bled into my art practice. In a sense, they are two homes. One in which I lived for most of my life, though not of my choosing, and the other a place that feels extremely radical and completely mine. Of course, I am aware that many people move further away from their hometown than 3,000 miles— people move to new countries with different languages and cultures. But this move felt significant for me. It felt like the first truly and extremely selfish decision I made as an adult— the first choice that would

radically transform my life, the first decision I made for me. I am not cut out for the Northeast. I hate winter. I get seasonal affective disorder and have always struggled with depression in the winter. Though it seems strange to choose a place based on climate, it makes sense to me. Of course, the MFA program was the main attraction, but San Diego is a place I want to stay beyond my three years in school. Here I have a sense of anonymity, while also having a connection to a small community. Being here has colored my art practice significantly. I have shifted, especially in the past year, towards an obsession with landscape and a romanticization of place and memory.

The work for my first year review show was largely a development and extension of the work I had completed for my undergrad thesis show which I finished a few months before coming here. The first year review work was based in nostalgia and change, something born not only in the shock of my move, but also in the extreme loneliness I felt, and a shift of landscape emotionally from outward, with friends and family, to inward towards self and isolation. Now that I have grown accustomed to working here, my explorations are more comfortable, and I take a lot of inspiration from the landscape around me, the details clear to me in contrast to what I grew up with.

If moving across the country, alone without any friends or family, required considerable willpower and perseverance, so too has my adjusting comfort level with the ocean. Though now I surf and swim in the ocean frequently, a hot bubble of fear rises up in me from time to time, as the dark, deep, cold waters encapsulate a sense of the unknown— a tremendous and uncanny power. The water holds not only frightening and unfamiliar creatures, but a vast volume and weight, a power of water that has gained momentum and shape over hundreds of miles— strength beyond my full understanding.

In the installation *Wave*, I am confronting the sense of being overwhelmed— the different levels of comfort or discomfort that come with being in the water. I imagine that walking through the exhibition, viewers might sometimes feel claustrophobic and at other times, tranquil. I am open to different interpretations, and anticipate there will be differences based on peoples' experiences and preconceptions not only about the ocean (filtered by what is after all only an abstracted representation) but also of fabric, quilts and curtains, clothing and thread, color, and art.

Seagrass

Consider the clothing you are wearing right now, the upholstered surfaces around you, the blanket on your bed or couch. What are these things made of? “Fabric” you might say. But this answer is incomplete. It is, in fact, thread, that holds fabric into the shapes that make up these items. You might not even see this thread, but it is there. Without thread, there is no sewing, there is no seam, no joint between two pieces, no small becoming larger or flat becoming three-dimensional. Thread works behind the scenes (seams).

In *Wave*, the thread is not so subtle. I don’t want it to be undercover. The thread is not a secret function, it is not smoke and mirrors. It is, instead, the trace of my hand, tracks left in the mud. The thread draws my path, it connects pieces of fabric and bisects others.



Figure 8: *Wave* detail, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021

The thread I have chosen for this project is four shades of green. These tones make up the colors of seagrass. Seagrass is something that to me encapsulates two dichotomous experiences of being within the ocean. The first is one of fear— an unexpected touch, a hitch in the breath. A piece of seagrass weaves through my toes and I look down from my surfboard to face the thing that has grazed my ankle. Don't look down. You might not want to know what drifts below. A ball of seaweed on the ground moves with the gentle undulation of the swell ten feet under.

This first experience, the one about fear, is one where the seagrass represents both the unknown and the known. It is what I *can* see, but it is also a symbol for all I *can't*, a symbol of the unknowable power that lies below, in front, around, behind.

The other experience is about tenderness and ease. When I first walk into the surf, I'm out for a fight. The breakers come in with annoying regularity, smashing into my thighs and torso. White water foams and bubbles around me as I shuffle through the sand. I time my movements and jump belly-down on the surfboard and paddle forward. Another wave breaks on me, I arch my back up to ride through it. Eventually, I move past the breaking waves. Some days it can take a long time. Others, I'm in sync with the water's movements. By the time I get to this calmer water, I need a rest. I sit up on the board and look down at my toes. A neat circle of seagrass floats next to me. It coils and floats at the surface with some pieces hanging below like loose threads. Out here the ocean is scarier. I cannot touch the seafloor— I cannot see it. I am away from the beach. The chaos of the white water is behind me, but ahead lies bigger waves, ones that come from far away, deeper, that have not been so tempered by the underwater geography. And yet, there is calm. There is space to talk. I coil a piece of vibrant green seagrass around my fingers. I weave a few strands together into a braid. On the beach, the piles of grass

are messy, tangled nests like what you pull from your hairbrush. Here, in the swell they are graceful, they are tender.

The seagrass dances with the water. It stitches the waves together, two sides of the ocean, one rough and safe, the other gentle and dangerous, joined at the seams.

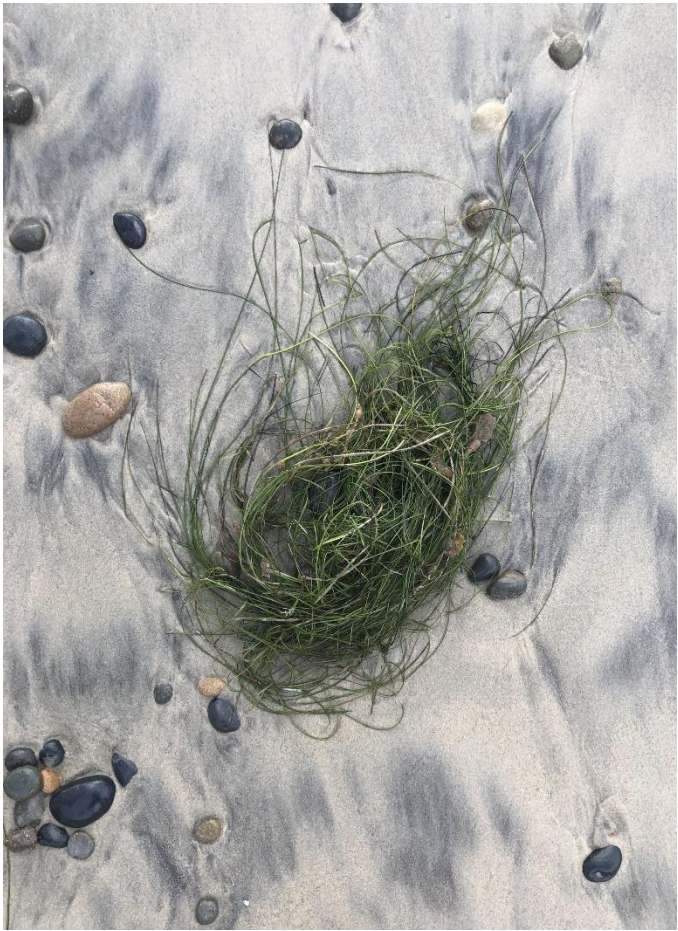


Figure 9: Seagrass on sand.

Figure 10: *Wave*, in-progress detail, silk chiffon, thread, 2021.

Water

If I asked you to imagine the color of the ocean, what would you picture? I see a specific blue, one made of many layers; it is both warm and cool in tone, containing a dense richness that seems to shift as I stare at it. The water absorbs and reflects light waves, bragging about its massiveness, its density, through the color it flaunts— even light cannot penetrate, cannot see, cannot escape. I also see silver, like liquid metal, as the sun shimmers across the rippled surface of the water. Here the light reflects, doesn't move through the depths.

In building up the color for *Wave*, I allowed variation and imperfection of the dye. The fabric is splotted and changes throughout. I dyed each piece at least twice, submerging the silk in careful pools of colored water, mixing and moving the pieces to promote even absorption. In areas where the fabric bubbled out of the vat, there are light spots. In some places, the chiffon clung to itself, resisting the dye and forming imprints of the tangles.

In dyeing repeatedly, I get a depth to the color that I couldn't otherwise. These imperfections in absorption allow for more density of hue and variation. The color builds, it layers and glazes. The light spots become reflections, the mirrored image of imaginary clouds, or the bubbling white water of a recently closed-out wave. They could be shallow spots where the light bounces off a sandy ocean floor.

Consider your distance from the water. Does this change its color? On one end of the gallery, *Wave* is light gray, a color I associate with distance. I can look out over the ocean, or down on it from above. The silver is where light reflects off the surface and doesn't allow me to see below. On the other end of the gallery is rich blue. I see blue when I am in the water, too close for the reflection to trick me. I can look down past my body and into blue depths.



Figure 11: *Wave* detail, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021.

I work from memory, allowing a hazy outline to make the form of the work. Without direct reference, I imagined the horizon line to be silver, the closer to shore, blue. This is how I conceptualized the color transition in the gallery— you are confronted with blue when you enter, and you can see the gray in the distance. However, in studying the water from shore one day, I saw that the horizon itself was a dark blue line, thick with distance. Closer to shore was a less saturated color, shallower and broken up with waves and movement. Another day, it was the opposite. I had imagined a consistency in the way color works on the water that just wasn't real.

I actually like this misunderstanding of mine. The work was never meant to be a literal representation, but more of a representation of a memory. An undulation of my imagination and

the visions I construct from them. This hazy imperfection might confuse you, make you question what you are seeing.



Figure 12: Ocean landscape.

Movement

How to represent movement in an object? In *Wave* I'm trying to address this question. The lines of stitching are like the lines of a pencil drawing. They reference movement themselves. The piece, however, also moves. Metal rods support each end into a straight line as they hang from the ceiling. Since the rods are hanging, and the fabric between is flexible, there will be some slight undulation of the piece as whole if there are people in the room. The chiffon is very light, which also leads to interesting movement, as the large quantity of fabric pulls at itself and the metal rods act as weight and balance for the whole thing. As a viewer walks among the pieces, as they are meant to do, they create wind with their body, and static pull towards the fabric.

This is in direct opposition to the works of Richard Serra, which are an important reference for me. In Serra's work, weight is a hugely important factor. Part of what makes the enormous metal structures so striking is the difficulty with which they move, the implied impossibility of this movement. And yet, Serra's pieces often have an easiness to them in the way they curve and bend through a space.

What I find so appealing about Serra's work, and what I try to emulate in my own, is experiential quality that occurs when working on such a large scale. In a review for the New York Times, Ken Johnson says of Serra's steel giants "This is sculpture not just as an interesting object to look at but as an engulfing experience." (Johnson) In effect, this is also what I am trying to accomplish. The scale of my practice has been growing and growing over the past several years. I want viewers to be able to walk through *Wave*, around it and under it even, and experience the work, rather than simply observe it.

Just as weight is an important factor in Serra's sculptures, lightness is an important element for me. The work can take up a large room and still fit in a grocery bag. It is expansive in its delicacy. It still moves with the bodies in the room, it breathes and sways.

This subtle movement of *Wave* is in direct contrast with the waves in the ocean, which contain huge amounts of power and weight. The lightness of the fabric is in opposition to the heaviness of liquid. A wave ripples like a sheet being shaken out off the clothesline, it has an immense surface, which we see, but also immense depth, which we do not see from above. In *Wave*, we can see the whole structure. There is no hidden mass underneath, just air.

Tidal Chart

One of my favorite works of art is *Body Pressure* by Bruce Nauman. It is a hot pink poster printed with a set of instructions telling the viewer to press their body against the wall. The concept of the work is quite simple, but as with many of Nauman's pieces, there is a subdued genius to its elegance. The instruction-based interactivity of the work always struck me as so important. It is acknowledging itself, its function. In exploring concepts for *Wave*, I thought about this reflection. When is the work activated? By what? By who?

I don't care for artificial lighting, which to me often feels forced and sometimes erases the nuances of color and texture. Instead, I prefer to work with natural light. An element of this is its change throughout the day. If you are utilizing natural light to show your work, it will look different all the time. What times of day are ideal viewing? Perhaps the work only exists within those hours.

For *Wave* I considered the tidal chart and the surf report I often check before getting in the water. It tells me how high the waves are, when low and high tide are on that day, and other important condition reports. From this information I can determine if the conditions are right for me to surf that day or not.

In *Wave*, I wanted the viewer to experience the work from different heights. The "water" might go far above their head in one place or hit their waist in another. This way the viewer sees the top and the underside of the work and is essentially forced to interact with the work from different angles.

Considering this with the natural light issue I discussed before, I imagined I could invent a tidal chart for *Wave*, one that changes throughout the day, and interacts with the natural light coming through the windows. From studying the tidal charts for San Diego on the days of the exhibition, I determined high and low tides, what that would look like, and how the viewer would experience this. The chart is available when the show is open, and depending on what time of day you enter the gallery, you might see something different. This tide changes every hour, through a pulley system. Through these changes, the work becomes dynamic. It is breathing and passing time. Viewers experience it differently depending on when they see the show, and in this way, it becomes more personalized, like the memory of visiting a place at a certain time. It does not exist in a sterile white cube. It is specific to the time of the show, the place of it, the weather, and the movements of the water.

In this way, the work is interactive. Not as much with the viewer, but with its environment, with its place in time.



Figure 13: *Wave at high tide*, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021.



Figure 14: *Wave at low tide*, silk chiffon, thread, metal rods, 2021.

Back to Shore

I get out of the lake, fingers and toes pruney with temporary wrinkles, hair dripping, slick with water. My skin feels tight and clean— comfortable. I towel off and pad across the dock and through the soggy grass as it squishes against my feet, watching frogs jump away from me and into the safety of weeds as I skirt the shoreline. The smell of sunshine on wet plants hangs in the air.

In another place and time— I push towards land. My hands and feet are stiff with cold, my lips are blue. I ride my board into land and wrap the leash around its fins as waves push into the backs of my knees. Sand clings to my feet as I make my way across the beach. I peel the wetsuit off my body and throw on some dry clothes, feeling salt on my skin, tasting it as I lick my lips. I take a warm shower, tiny pieces of seaweed rinsing from my hair and down the drain.

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