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College of Visual
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MFA PROJECT REPORT

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Fibers

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...and the light was blue

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PROJECT REPORT

My body of artwork entitled, *...and the light was blue*, has in its DNA the varied professions I've had through the years. Those include fashion designer, product developer, antique dealer, small business owner, and professor of fashion.



Fig. 1 Indigo Itajime Shibori on silk noil



Fig. 2. Linen Kimono with appliqué

In that time, two main themes stand out, interest in the past, and a passion for textiles. Their commonality is clothing for the human body. While fashion is still important to me, I realize that it is cloth and the process of the making with my hands that matters most.

My current work has evolved from working close to the body to creating fiber-based art. My main interest is the physical manifestations of the passage of time on objects and beings. I find wizened faces and knobby hands more intriguing than smooth classical perfection. When outside in the natural world, I am drawn to gnarly trees with strange burls and holey stones hollowed out by weathering. My works are the embodiment of my lived experiences, where I honor moments in time and space that have stopped me mid-stride, compelling me to examine the details more closely. These unexpected experiences of form and surface textures are grounded in nature.



Fig. 3 and 4. Inspiration photos taken by the author

My practice begins with observing nature, collecting objects, and photographing signs of erosion while out walking. The meditative repetition of knitting, weaving, or stitching by hand reflects contemplative walks in the natural world.ⁱ These processes become my way of sketching. Negative spaces formed in knitting and crochet are reminiscent of crevices in nature. The human history displayed in used, worn-through, and much-loved cloth mirrors the natural history of smoothed, rounded rocks, and other eroded objects found during walks. Faces, likewise, reveal their own stories through strange growths, scars, knots, and holes. The holes are portals into the past. Studying and imagining the history of aged, worn objects is integral to my practice.



Fig. 5. and 6. Inspiration photos taken by the author

The textured surfaces I create are abstracted from tactile textures observed in nature. Tree bark and stone provide a rich source of inspiration. On a recent trip to London, I encountered Yorkstone, a type of sandstone typically used for paving sidewalks.



Fig. 7 Yorkstone Pavers, Kensington, London

I was fascinated by what I observed to be ancient topographical maps worn into the surface by centuries of footsteps upon them. The natural color of the stone closely resembles that of undyed linen. At about the same time, I was introduced to the work of a Norwegian artist Hanne Friis, whom art critic *Line Ulekleiv describes as creating “sculptural textiles in spiral.”*ⁱⁱ Friis dyes fabric by hand using foraged plant material, then she densely hand-stitches fabric to construct sculptural forms. Her technique of intensely folding and stitching fabric inspired me to develop my style of ruching to sculpt bas relief forms.



Fig. 8. Hanne Friis. *DeNada*. 2016.
Denim: sewn by hand.

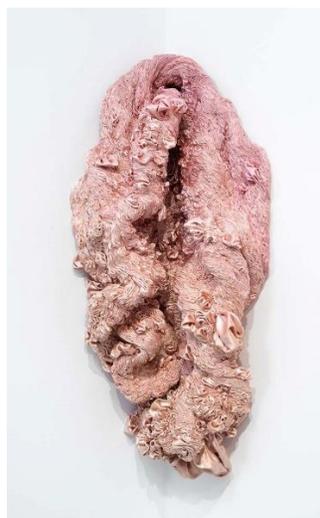


Fig. 9. Hanne Friis. *Kløft*. 2012.
Silk: 39 3/8" x 15 3/4"



Fig. 10. Hanne Friis. *Kløft*.
Detail.

Another artist whose work and ethos has had a strong influence on me is Sheila Hicks. Not long after I discovered her, an exhibition of her work took place at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. I had the good fortune to be able to attend her artist talk and view the exhibit. I am drawn to her approach to fiber and creating art.

“Children notice where they are walking first; then they look up. First, I’m grounded, then I spiral up (most of the time when we talk of spiral movement, it is a “downward spiral”: the death movement, interesting that this is a feeling of looking up, towards the heavens, the sun, positivity). It is the discovery of how to go up. Look where you are, go back to when you were very young and enjoy every day like you use to know how to do it, how you were with it- the magic circle. Then come down and get real. Ask yourself, “Is this Art?”ⁱⁱⁱ

What I enjoy about Hicks’ comments is that they are, in a way, parallel to my own. When I create, I begin walking and wondering at the natural world around me. I translate this into my art, and I ask the viewers to pause, wonder, and think about their place in the world.



Fig. 11 Sheila Hicks. *Seize, Weave Space*. 2019. Installation view



Fig. 12 Sheila Hicks, *Si j'étais de laine, vous m'accepteriez ?* 2016. Exhibition view galerie frank elbaz, Paris.



Fig. 13 Sheila Hicks. *Si j'étais de laine, vous m'accepteriez ?*, detail, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, 2019.

My color palette is limited to neutral tones found in natural flax (linen), and a range of blues created with cyanotype and natural indigo dye. By constraining color, I emphasize line, form, and texture., My work takes on curvilinear amorphous forms similar to the shapes that I am drawn to in nature. Initially, I began working with cyanotype, an alternative photographic process, to document found pieces of needlework, then objects I handknitted and wove. This way of working progressed into using cyanotype as the background to draw with linen thread, thereby incorporating elements of chance onto the surface and later to inform the next intuitive steps.



Fig. 14. *Aureole*. 2019. Linen, knitted, twined & woven: 38" x 38"



Fig. 15. *Aureole*. Detail.



Fig. 16. *Cyanoscape*. 2019. Cyanotype on cotton; 36" x 36"

Organic, curved lines sculpt the work, with the looping patterns of knitting and crochet emphasizing the holes. Holes are also cut into the cloth and encircled with buttonhole stitches, creating eyelet “portals.” Curved lines of repeated running stitches surround the gaps and create a path through the piece reminiscent of a meandering walk. Breaks in the line of stitches reflect moments of intense observation expressed through areas of rich texture in knitting, crochet, or organically pleated and ruched cloth.



Fig. 17. *Meandering Series, 2*. 2019. Cyanotype on cotton with linen stitching, weaving, and crochet; 10" x 10"



Fig. 18. *Meandering Series, 2*. 2019. Cyanotype on cotton with linen stitching, appliqué, and crochet; 10 ½" x 10"



Fig. 19. Samples as assemblage. 2019-2020. Cyanotype cotton with buttonhole stitch, chain stitch, smocking and crochet; 4" x 5 1/2", 3 1/4" x 4 3/4", 3 1/2" x 6 1/2"



Fig. 20. *Synapses*.2019. Cyanotype cotton, linen overlay, hand embroidery, and crochet; 18" x 17"

Sometimes there are ghost images on the artwork, turning them into photograms, presenting variations in color, light, and shade that create a backdrop to stitch on. The infinite variations evoke the elemental mystery of being, the horizon whose beginning or end we can never experience. The negative spaces reinforce that infinity. The viewer can peer into the hole, but what is or is not there may never be known. It is the wondering, the *not* knowing, that is the crux of the matter.



Fig. 21. *Whispers*. 2019. Cyanotype cotton with hand embroidery & traditional hand-tailoring; 17" x 11"

The other method I use to obtain blue contains the infinite possibility of color variations. Indigo dye, much like the flax fiber, has ancient origins; evidence of its earliest use exists in a 6000-year-old artifact from Peru.^{iv} The dye cannot color the cloth without undergoing a chemical reduction and oxidation process. It requires time and patience. It is a labor of love whose rewards come slowly. There is a magical moment in indigo dyeing when the cloth transforms from a yellow-green to a blue-green color that deepens into a vibrant blue when exposed to air. After oxidation, the fabric can be re-immersed into the vat until achieving the desired depth of color. In some cultures, the dye-vat is considered a living being. For instance, in Japan, the god of indigo, Aizen Shin, is given an offering of sake in a small ceramic bottle topped with an evergreen sprig to ensure good results of their labors.^v



Fig. 22. *Terra, uncharted journey*. 2020. Cyanotype cotton with hand embroidery & traditional millinery techniques; 21" x 29"

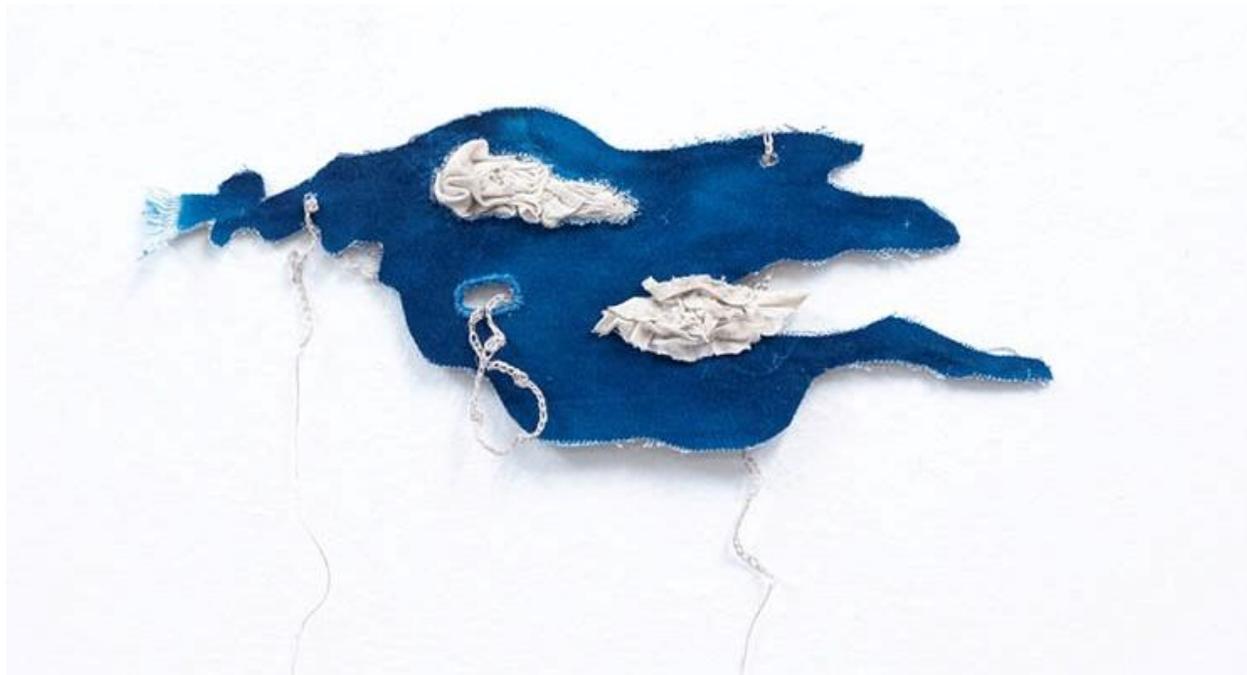


Fig. 23. *Cumulus*. 2020. Cyanotype cotton with ruched linen, crochet, and hand embroidery; 14" x 9"

The Slow Movement, and within it, Slow Fashion^{vi} and Slow Stitch, has had a profound influence on how I approach my work. As a former fashion designer, speed and efficacy were of utmost importance. The advent of fast fashion has brought the massive cost of this practice to the forefront. Living in a society where “want” has replaced “need,” we see a considerable amount of waste for the no longer “wanted” items. In the not-so-distant past, as a culture, we once repaired belongings; we now often throw them out and replace them with new ones. Worse, we discard slightly worn clothing that no longer appeals to us. To counteract this practice, I gather discarded linen items to be reused, thus extending their lifespan. In doing this, I honor the history of the human labor and resources that went into its original form. Making use of secondhand, stained, or torn cloth is at the heart of Slow Stitch. The movement advocates “a less-is-more mindset, valuing quality over quantity, and bringing a meaningful and thoughtful approach to textile practice.”^{vii} What this means for me is that, instead of being in a rush to finish, I take my time and let the materials and process speak to me. They talk to me through stitching by hand with needle and thread on cloth. Conversely, in the past, I might have used three different machines to make one piece as fast as I could go. It takes more time to do work by hand, and with that time, I can become fully immersed in the piece and the moment.



Fig. 24. *Untitled*. 2019. Linen from a reclaimed dress, stitched by hand; 7½" x 12"

The materials that I use have their own previous life before being utilized in my work. They existed in functional cloth objects, such as garments and household linens, and contain the original resources that created them. The fibers drawn from the plants then spun into yarns and woven into cloth, are all produced through time-intensive human labor. Additional labor transformed the woven fabric into garments. I honor this labor by returning discarded clothing to

its original form to be re-created into works of art. I especially treasure undyed linen, made from the flax plant. The history of linen, as the oldest recorded cloth made by human hands,^{viii} appeals to my interest in the past. Secondly, the characteristic stiffness and body of woven linen cloth lend itself well to the swirled manipulations evident in my work.



Fig. 25. *Waves*.2020. Linen from a reclaimed shirt, stitched by hand; 33" x 32"



Fig. 26. *Waves*. Detail.

In conclusion, my work is about contemplation; it is about taking time, being in the moment, giving energy, and paying attention to the materials and the making. For me, the process is equally, if not more, important than the resulting product. When I am satisfied with a piece, everything has lined up. When the artwork is less than I would like it to be, it becomes an exercise that helps me progress to the next step. As an artist, I understand that once artwork has left my hands, I no longer have control of the idea behind it. At that point, meaning emerges out of the personal interaction between the art and the viewer. I know I have succeeded if the viewer spends time scrutinizing the piece and trying to see into and beyond it. And finally, you can see that my work has not come “out of the blue,” but especially the blues from cyanotype and indigo, colors from the ages.



Fig. 27. *Terminus*. 2020. Cyanotype cotton, pleated, twisted and stitched by hand and machine knitted; 24" x 43"

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- ⁱ Wellesly-Smith, C. (2015). *Slow stitch: Mindful and contemplative textile art*, London, UK: Batsford.
- ⁱⁱ Ulikliev, L. (2019, November). *Spiral Spin*. Hanne Friis. <http://www.hannefriis.com/html/text.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hicks, S. (2019). An interview with Sheila Hicks at the Nasher. *Sheila Hicks: Seize, Weave Space*. Public interview style talk presented May 10, 2019, Dallas Texas.
- ^{iv} Splitstoser, J. C., Dillehay, T. D., Wouters, J., & Claro, A. (2016). Early pre-Hispanic use of indigo blue in Peru. *Science Advances*, 2(9). doi: 10.1126/sciadv.1501623
- ^v Balfour-Paul, J. (2000). *Indigo*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.
- ^{vi} Fletcher, K. (2010). Slow fashion: An Invitation to systems change. *Fashion Practice*, 2(2,) 259-265. doi: 10.2752/175693810X12774625387594
- ^{vi} Wellesly-Smith, C. (2015).

^{viii} Barber, E. J. W. (1995). *Women's work: The first 20,000 years: women, cloth, and society in early times*. New York: Norton.