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Nest

Camillia Elci

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design and Art History

May 2022

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Allyson Mellberg Taylor

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Hannah Sions, Ph.D

Dymph De Wild

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Abstract

The major themes in this body of work are time and layers. These themes are linked by the materiality of the work. Intentional destruction and recreation, perpetually. The work is constantly being made, destroyed, and remade. It is always partly past and partly future. *Nest* is a self portrait displaying objects acquired and made over the past several years.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Nest, is a self portrait consisting of all the things I have collected both physically and mentally over the last four years. My personal understanding of a self-portrait is a look into either the physical or intangible nature of someone. The physical aspect of this portrait is mostly composed of tulle, paint, earth, yarn, steel, etc. The intangible aspect of *Nest* being the hidden features and embedded words that represent an inner dialogue. Interestingly, the aesthetic of the Virginia Opossum is what started to bring *Nest* together in my mind. In the simplest ways, the Virginia Opossum does its best in creating its den; it does its best to collect what it may need but it physically cannot hold everything it wants to. This process mirrors the wayward way I have created this *Nest*. In this thesis, I will describe how this piece came to be by breaking down the process into three stages: introduction, creating, and reflecting. First, the introduction will set the stage for understanding how it started. Next, I will discuss the creating process of the piece, discussing the steps of conceptualizing, collecting, creating, and nesting as components of the final work. Finally, I will ponder historical context/influences; its existence in the gallery and reception; and my own final reflections. In addition to the reflective aspect found throughout this work, there are also excerpts of internal reflective dialogue found throughout this thesis, represented in *italics*.

Historical Context/Influences

The first two major influences in my practice are Judith Scott¹ and Julie Schenkelberg.² I first saw Scott's work at the American Visionary Art Museum in

¹ "Uncovering Innate Talent," textile artist, n.d., <https://www.textileartist.org/textile-artist-judith-scott-uncovering-innate-talent/>.

² <http://www.julieschenkelberg.com/>

Baltimore, MD and Schenkelberg's at The Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, PA. I had a similar feeling to when I witnessed both, a feeling of relief; the pieces that whirl around in my head were not foolish and very possible, specifically installations like *Nest*. Judith Scott's (her and I are both twins) totems validated the way I had been interacting with fiber. She finds objects and wraps them no matter what the objects may be, similar to the pieces hanging in the center of my *Nest*. Julie Schenkelberg uses whole rooms as her installation areas. She uses materials only found in the city or area the installations will be. In addition to the works by Scott and Schenkelberg, I am also influenced by the writings of Louis Bourgeois:

The friend (the spider – why the spider?) because my best friend was my mother and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and useful as an araignée. She could also defend herself, and me, by refusing to answer 'stupid', inquisitive, embarrassing personal questions.

I shall never tire of representing her.
I want to: eat, sleep, argue, hurt, destroy
Why do you?
My reasons belong exclusively to me.
The treatment of Fear.³

Louis Bourgeois' writings on *Spider* is a recent influence, while I was working on this piece I rediscovered her practice. She used the spider as a recurring motif. The way she talks about the spider and revisits it helped me understand my own view of using the word *Nest*, I was able to articulate my own thoughts to myself more clearly.

Finally, I was influenced by Chiharu Shiota's⁴ methods of making webs and structures. She and I both use found objects and yarn/wool to express herself. Her work is

³ Tate, "Spider', Louise Bourgeois, 1994," Tate, January 1, 1994, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-spider-al00354>.

⁴ Chiharu Shiota, "塩田千春," CHIHARU SHIOTA, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.chiharu-shiota.com/>.

the same manifestation of an emotion similar to that I am expressing: “The creative process is far from being therapeutic for her though; she needs her fear to continue to make art. Creating using her emotion, her goal is to connect her inner universe with the outer universe. Her art helps her to understand herself and her emotions and to connect with others, including strangers.”⁵

Our processes are similar except I do not have a team and our scales differ. The scale of my installation is meant to envelop the viewer while also containing many smaller objects and details to focus on. Shiota and her team create a matrix/framework by using a net and then throwing rope through the holes. All of the artists that directly influence this work are from the contemporary era.

Concept

Nest was born of a need. I needed to make this installation, I needed to imagine 1001 different ways it could be set up. I needed both the act of gathering materials and gathering my thoughts: The feel, the buildup of individual layers of paint and fabrics kept me up at night. The processes I have used as a ritual held my hand through this time in my life. This *Nest* was a necessary interweaving of the rituals that have carried me and the meanings I have derived from living. There are two themes that I have realized are a functional throughline in *Nest*: time and layers.

⁵ Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle, “Web-Spinning Artist Chiharu Shiota Creates Moving and Haunting Installations out of Wool,” *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, July 19, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yjeanmundelsalle/2021/07/19/web-spinning-artist-chiharu-shiota-creates-moving-and-haunting-installations-out-of-wool/?sh=658ee4cb669f>.

Why time?

“Time is subjective, not a fixed constant. People assume that time is a strict progression from cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff”⁶

According to this quote from Doctor Who, time is always in flux, subjective to experience— anything I need it to be. Recently, I have needed time as a map with which to navigate my memories, thoughts, mental health, and sense of self. I assigned a different chunk of time to represent each layer of materials used for *Nest*. The ritual of my process has become centered on layers and time: the ritual of making allows me to process the time represented by each material layer, one thread, scrap, stick, and memory at a time.

Over the course of the installation week, I viewed Duke Gallery as an extension of my studio. I brought all of my materials, no matter how seemingly arbitrary as I needed to see how each one felt in the space. I curated my section of the gallery as a place where I would be able to sit in and reflect on what I felt internally and tried to present those feelings externally. Every day we put on this performance for others, a choreographed dance of being. Our lives are deeply performative, a duality of internal truth and outward expression, sometimes at odds with one another. I have talked about my sexuality as well as my battle with depression, anxiety and ADHD in previous artists' statements. Privately, this is a critical part of my life and identity, although outwardly, these things are largely invisible. I am cisgendered, bisexual woman in a relationship

⁶ “Blink,” *Doctor Who* (BBC One, June 9, 2007).

with a cisgendered man; together, we read as a straight couple. My queerness is held back beneath layers of perception, but it is no less a core component to who I am. My struggles with mental health are invisible as well. To most of the world, I may appear to be a straight, healthy, neurotypical woman—an identity at odds with how I view myself. It is a daily dance of reminding myself of perceptions and holding myself up without external validation.

Through the process of making/writing I find myself asking— *is it that I am thinking about it too much? Am I making way too much of my identity? Will I have to always hide parts of myself from my family? Why do I care about the social ramifications of being?*

This piece is not just about my sexuality or my mental health but the inner monologue where I draw visual and conceptual connections. These jagged and soft parts reflect bits of conversations with others, dialogue myself, and my materials.

Chapter 2: Creating

Preparing

The creation process is broken into two sections: preparing and installation. These phases are distinct steps in order to understand what the space needed and then understand how the pieces came together as one. The scale of the piece was decided by how much materials I had accumulated. Wrapping, collecting, felting, steel, rust, tulle, remnants.

Wrapping⁷

I think I have always made my work as a sort of ritual. The ritual became clear while spending the long hours in my studio and being able to see all the materials that I collected. These all take up their own space in my life, each a home in my brain and nest.

During my time in the MFA program at James Madison University I have been making wrapped objects (see fig.1,2,3) mostly out of tulle and yarn and sticks. Working with the repetitive motion of wrapping I thought about the duality and enclosure of the inner layers vs. the outer. The outside, the facade, is what we present to the world and the inner is what I am assigning as the “true” self. The parts poking through would be the parts of the “true” self that come through the performative outer layer, intentionally or not. They take on their own form depending on how tightly they are wound or how thick I made the inner layer.

⁷ Additional major materials: Paints, fire, sticks/ branches, water, left over fabrics from past pieces, ash, canvas, drop cloth, bones



Figure 1. Wrapped objects hanging from ceiling



Figure 2. Tulle wrapped by yarn

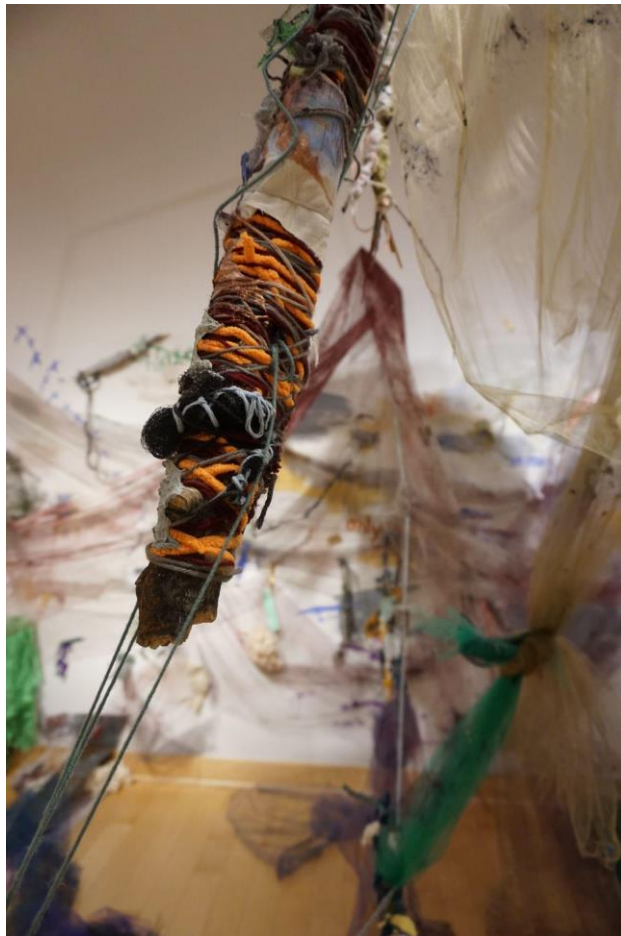


Figure 3. Close up of wrapped object

Collecting

Not everything collected will have a purpose

Not everything I thought I needed was found

Not everything we made together was meant for us

Not everything I have kept was mine for taking

These things are a part of me now (see fig.4)

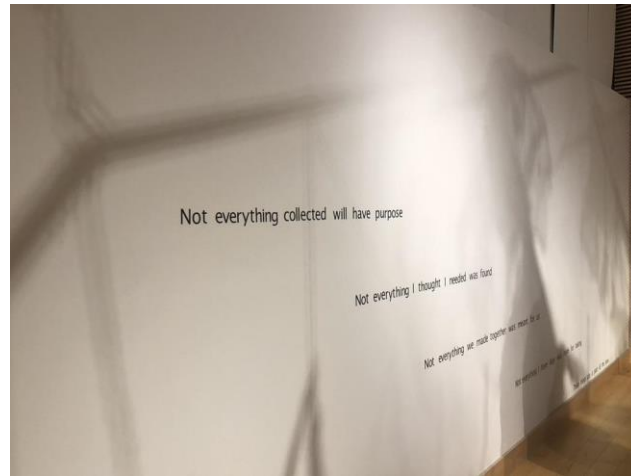


Figure 4. Vinyl lettering on the left side of the piece, welcoming viewers into the space.

Collecting has been a part of my life and studio practice for a long time. It can vary from an one-off object from the side of the highway or multiple boxes of shells, bones, or keys. I used to consider collecting as only the things I have found but when looking at *Nest* in its entirety, I see that the purchased materials, like tulle and paint, are also materials I constantly collect. Sometimes I collect things habitually, when I am in a making-lull, and sometimes I know precisely what I am going to use them for. I might have, at one time, called this action “rescuing,” but I now have come to view it more as a recognition of myself in objects. Collections and nests are synonyms in my artistic practice. I keep thinking of opossums, and the way they collect with their tails reminds me of what I must look like dragging sticks and dead animals of the side of the highway as “their tail doesn’t make the most secure method of transportation and you will

frequently find parts of their “dropped load” on the way to the nest site.”⁸ I wonder what opossums collect, and what one might find in their “dropped load,” or in my own? What does the archive of my nests— and that which is eventually left out— tell me about myself, and the way I want others to perceive me?

Felting

The use of felting started in this piece because I wanted to use raw wool that I had collected from a local farm in Rockingham County, Virginia. I wanted to know what the process of using raw wool was so I taught myself how to clean, process, and felt the wool. Felting is the action of matting fibers, which is, ultimately, intertwining them until friction binds them together. The building of a nest is similar, pushing found materials together, weaving and intertwining until they become one form, a place to lay and rest. Through this process I have transformed my materials with friction against the self in a way that makes them stronger. Made stronger by the use of agitation and compression, I see a connection that a lot of the materials I have used have gone through a similar process to become stronger (see fig. 5).

*Our dirt, our dust, our trail.
It is still a part of you
Even when forgotten*

⁸ Rehabilitation and Education ., “Opossum Nest Building,” Opossum Society of the United States, OAD, <https://opossumsocietyus.org/opossum-nest-building/>.



Figure 5. Example of felting used in *Nest*

Steel

Steel is commonly perceived as strong and permanent but it is actually very malleable. It is in this state that I have displayed it, to be presented as a ragged, dangerous edge and as evidence of oxidation and breakdown— mirroring how the work addresses the oxidation and breakdown of perceptions and presentations of self as a result of “exposure” to the “elements” of social contracts and inner monologues. I think about what will happen with the metal after I have used it as well. It can be recycled; it can be left to oxidize and transform into something completely different. I like the open-ended nature of its destiny.

Rust

Rust forms through the process of oxidation. I compared the process of oxidation to breathing and the passing of time. Rust in my work is a direct metaphor for the passing of time. I controlled the rust you see throughout *Nest* (see fig. 6). From where it is placed to how much time it had to form. I did this by manipulating paper pulp and cloth soaked in vinegar and water.

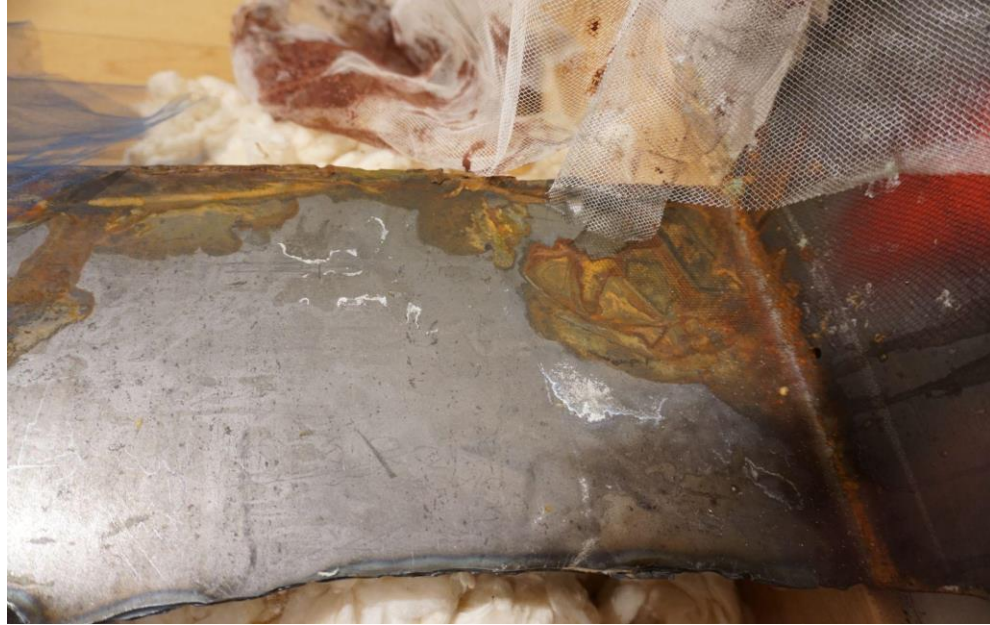


Figure 6. Rusted steel in a pattern caused by fabric soaked in vinegar and water
Tulle

Tulle was one of the first materials to go into my studio and takes up the most space. With a history of dance in my past, tulle has become the fabric that I use in most of my work. I was often surrounded by romantic tutu's which flowed with the dancer or pancake tutu's which hold their shape and only give a slight bounce. How the tulle is used in different manners to express versatility and strength but also ease and fluidity of the material. I hold on to it because of how versatile, strong and soft it can be. The rich history between tulle and feminine also gives it an added layer of complexity. Each tulle fragment is its own standing object and is not intended to be viewed as a smaller layer that is a piece of a greater whole. Every layer is translucent/transparent depending on its color. I limited the number of layers to lean into the ethereal and vulnerability aspect of its material quality. Each sheet of tulle has been interacted with in many ways: buried, torn, dragged, drowned, burnt, melted, wrapped, sewn, and slathered in paints (see fig 7,8).



Figure 7. Image of tulle on left side of the space



Figure 8. Up close view of different section of tulle that had been drowned in paints

Remnants

The remains or the byproducts of all of my collected materials are important to the process because it is a literal accumulation of all the things I've made. Why would I throw away parts of that? In throwing away those bits you are throwing away the most important parts – the byproduct whether it is good or bad. In the process, I create and then after I sweep and scoop the remainder of dust and put it in a bucket that I added to each day. I do not make any value judgments on remains, I have accepted them as they are, because “*these things are a part of me now.*” I have been collecting dust from my studio, including dirt from dead plants, leaves and previous works. Sometimes we just need to acknowledge what has been (see fig 9).



Figure 9. Pile of ash, dust, earth, remains from prior works

In the Gallery

Nesting could happen anywhere, for many reasons. Traditionally I think a majority of people will think of birds, we have taken the word “nest” and ascribed it with many meanings extending to different creatures. For me this understanding of nesting is a personification of materials that grew into a self-portrait. While collecting and then creating—making the components of parts that create this installation—I made connections, like stories. For example, I added a jaw bone and the last contents of a candle to sit upon the largest wrapping (see fig.10). This was a reminder to myself of how I came to have these, whether literal or imagined. One was a gift and one I could not seem to remember how it became a part of my collection so I made up a story



Figure 10. Jaw bone of a deer and the last burnings of a candle on the largest wrapping

for myself of fantasy and slight altering of my real life. During the creation of *Nest* and the installation I would have my mind running, retelling myself stories in my head; these stories later melted away into meditation. I collected my materials, assembling, reworking, layering, and when it comes to an end it is left alone to decay on its own or used again for the same purpose.

The purpose being the act of giving meaning to all the bits and pieces that made this self portrait, one for my own need, and to see myself in the light I have made.

The way I threw materials together was a testament to something. I have found a sense of balance in my own life, something that has not always lived within my mind. My process has become a form of meditation. I originally started meditating to work through my neurodivergence (Depression, Anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder). Depending on what turmoil I have learned to live with, my process is what gives me the constant state of chaos I have come to find I rely on. Is it a testament to the need to just “make” or maybe I need a loose ritual to make my own sense of belonging in my own head, my own heart making multiple things at once? I think I have found the sense of belonging I look for. There was a question I asked myself while making an inventory of all of the separate pieces prior to installing: *what is the difference between tangled and intertwined, and why was that nuanced difference important for me to find out?*

I was able to work through this question physically during the installation. Integration, I have surmised, is what we control: we intertwine our lives with others. It is in this act that we have agency over our own lives and relations. I intertwined the tulle with the yarn, as well as the hanging grid with the pieces on the wall. Tangles are what

happens when I lose that agency and allow life to happen to me. I realized through the physical installation that both intertwining and being intertwined were okay as long as I could see which parts I constructed and which parts happened on their own.

My first focus for this installation was accumulating materials. The second focus is very similar to that of Judy Pfaff. I have a clear sense of what I wanted the piece to feel like but didn't know what it was fully about until I was fully immersed in the process. "I flail around quite a lot with a clear sense of what I would like it to feel like...but by the end something else takes over."⁹

I have made previous installations, they were similar in the way that I do not know how it will truly look until I am working in the space. Until I can feel the energy of my materials meet the energy of the space, which feels the most organic way to display work because you are working with what you have been given.

While making multiple things at once, I think I have found a sense of belonging that I have been looking for. Home is more of a metaphorical place I am reaching for, a place I have yet to experience. The process of making feels like the closest to feeling whole, where I want to be. I have made multiple of these kinds of objects (e.g. the wrappings and the tulle layers) because seeing the physical journey of making is meaningful. If there was only one object, then the viewer would not see the many ways I have wrapped to create an object. There is not really a finished portion of the kind of continual wrapping I have used in these stick bundles, there is a need to make them. There was always one wrapping in the works while other pieces were being made. I have noticed that the more of these objects I made, the simpler they became. The size did not

⁹ *Making and Feeling, Art21* (MYCulture, 2006), <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/judy-pfaff-making-feeling-short/>.

seem to affect the complexity, only the volume. It takes time- when something takes time in my specific practice a mess tends to follow.

There is something about the idea of my own dirt, my own filth, my own mess that makes me want to revel in it. Mistakes may not make you who you are but I think there is something about your metaphorical scars and leftovers that are important to acknowledge. I come back to the image of me as an opossum, leaving a trail on the way to a den, on the way to make something that came out of a need. This is what you are looking at when you see dust, sticks, ash, soil in the work. You are looking at my past work and the trash and trauma that have been built into something more, a *Nest* for whatever comes next.



Figure 11. Shot of the left-hand side leading towards the wall of vinyl text

Chapter 3: Reflecting

“ART IS MADE BY ORDINARY PEOPLE. Creatures having only virtues can hardly be imagined making art. It’s difficult to picture the Virgin Mary painting landscapes. Or Batman throwing pots. The flawless creature wouldn’t need to make art.”¹⁰

After the creation process comes a time to reflect. It is nice to see the viewers interact and to see truly what the viewers view is – someone else's vision.

Final reflection/attendee response

The most rewarding part of completing the work was viewer interaction. In my mind, that was when the piece was done. I “saw all the things I didn’t plan.”¹¹ I saw the hanging wrappings move side to side because someone bumped into one, which set off a chain reaction because all the suspended pieces were intertwined. When the gallery first opened, it looked like I had caught people in my web (see fig 12). I have always struggled with completing pieces, how would I know when it was completed? Former Youtube star Jenna Marbles might say that she and I “have a ‘too much’ gene.”¹² When I saw people interacting with it, my friends tried to read the words I had hidden. I understood that I did not have to think of my *Nest* as done. I could think of it as another step. I can now take the individual parts of my nest and make them separate pieces.

¹⁰ David Bayles and Ted Orland, “The Nature of the Problem,” in *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (Santa Cruz, CA: Image Continuum Press, 1993), p. 4.

¹¹ *Making and Feeling, Art21* (MYCulture, 2006), <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/judy-pfaff-making-feeling-short/>.

¹² *Jenna Expressing Her Too Much Gene for 2 Minutes Straight, Youtube*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gzjlq-t2s0Y>.

When I break the *Nest* down I will be packing the components separately so that they can start their lives anew. I will be making the same comparison to my art practice and how it influences the next part of my life no longer with the guidance of academia. As I anticipate this upcoming change of finally leaving higher education and stepping into a world without a safety net, I also anticipate my practice changing. My view of my own self portrait will change along with it.

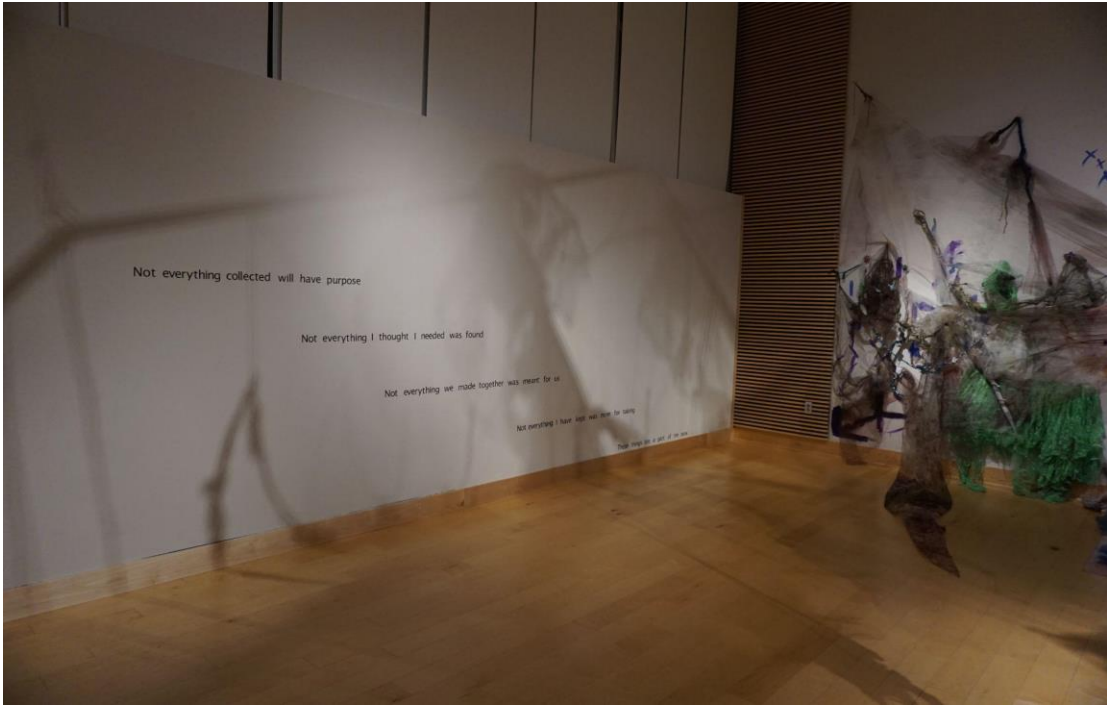


Figure 12. Picture from the Exhibition opening

Appendix A



Nest Installation View, left side



Nest Installation view, text wall with shadows



Installation view (center)



Installation view, textile detail (Photo credit: Sarah Phillips)



Textile detail (right side)



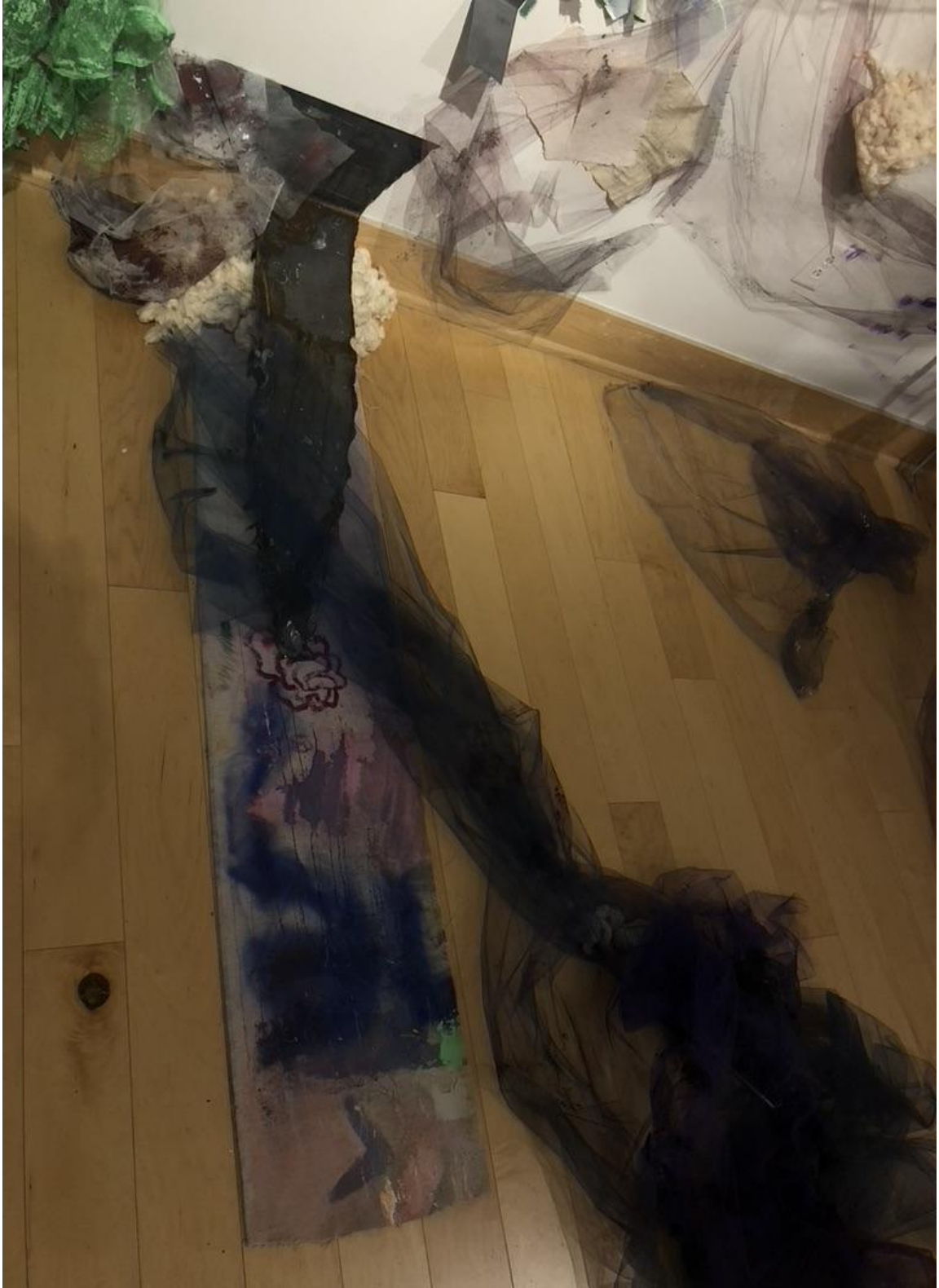
Nest Installation view, suspended sculptures



Installation view, wall detail



Installation view, floor detail: deer skull and embroidery



Installation view, floor detail: steel, tulle, canvas, artist made paper, wool



Installation view, suspended elements detail (photo credit: Zia Palmer)



Installation view, suspended elements detail (photo credit: Sarah Phillips)



Wall texture detail, left side



Sculpture connected to both hanging grid and wall with yarn and tulle



Detail of sculpture showing how the sculptures were embedded on wall



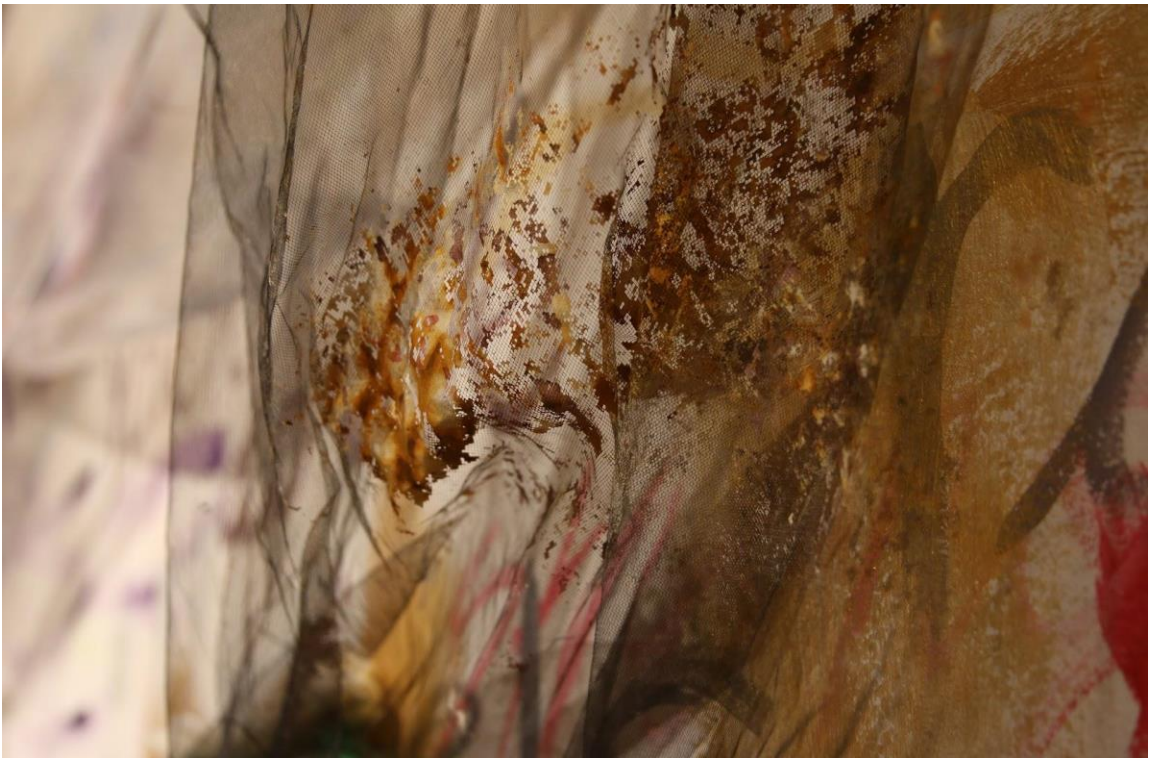
Detailed view, Locket, right side corner



Detailed View, draped tulle and yarn-wrapped tulle



Close up of wrappings with a deer vertebrae (photo credit:Sarah Phillips)



Detailed view of tulle with rust and pulp stains



Detailed view of artist made paper and typewriter text



Installation view, right side(Photo credit: Zia Palmer)

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