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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Out of Place

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

in

Visual Arts

by

Heige Kim

Committee in charge:

Professor Janelle Iglesias, Chair  
Professor Amy Adler  
Professor Lorena Mostajo  
Professor Wayne Yang

2023



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University of California San Diego

2023

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## DEDICATION

*To FSL*

## EPIGRAPH

*In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources.  
But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the  
home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that  
sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted,  
sacred ground.*

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Out of Place

by

Heige Kim

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Janelle Iglesias, Chair

*Out of Place* serves as a record for the last three years of my practice, tracing the ideas that informed my work, braiding together the strands of conflicting ideas and research on the Salton Sea, plastic waste, dust, and how we are tethered to invisible labor and wastescapes. This paper is a patchwork, a quilt of my weavings with personal narratives, drawing upon Discard studies, Asian American studies, Indigenous studies, autotheory and artists across disciplines to resituate my Asian American identity. This paper follows the trail of waste and debris, re-routed

and re-formed, expressing entanglement of our lives with non-human beings and the environment.



Figure 1: *The Salton Sea*, 2020, Installation view, single channel video with sound.

## Land, Things, Time<sup>1</sup>

Manifest destiny/Colonialism - justified ownership of land and continued genocide of first people by the settlers... The soul of the settler, non-Indigenous, white American can never fully settle or rest until it fully owns the land; it cannot rest until achieving indigeneity. Colonial desire and quest for indigeneity is a quest for a new religion and a new mythology, stories that are formed and re-formed through traumatic, apocalyptic events that defy human comprehension— Such as the genocide of millions of humans and nonhumans.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I depend on Clarissa Chevalier, Art History Ph.D. candidate at UC San Diego (UCSD), as one of my first readers. She suggested this title, and it's fitting. When the source is known, even from a casual conversation, I acknowledge their contribution in the notefield.

<sup>2</sup>Kite, *What's on the earth is in the stars; and what's in the stars is on the earth: Lakota Relationships with the Stars and American Relationships with the Apocalypse*. I was introduced to this text by Denise Rodriguez, Art History, Ph.D. candidate at UCSD. This reading was instrumental in thinking about my own desires. I am leaning hard on Liboiron, Kimmerer, and Kite to understand my position as a new settler. I don't want to appropriate American indigenous land relations as my own, but I study and quote their work here to better understand what I've internalized as a new settler and the land that I call home. I want to find ways to understand myself beyond my experiences. I am leaning even harder on Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism* as I question my own methodologies

Standing facing the Salton Sea for the first time, I bathe in the unforgiving sun and the salty, decaying stench. I gaze at the slow, thick, moving water toward the shore. I stand far enough away that the water will not reach my feet. The clanking of the camera strap against the tripod disrupts the unnerving quietness, and I can hear my own shallow breath, trying not to breathe in too deeply. The scorching sun hits the surface of the water and the wading birds, making it seem like the landscape is almost colorless, blending in with the blinding light of the late afternoon sun. So much of what I read described the sea as a toxic wasteland. I wonder if my uneasiness is rooted in the moment or because I was already too entrenched with different stories and ideas about the sea.

I am struck by what I don't know and what I want to know. I am struck by how little I know about the infrastructure that sustains my life. How do I make sense of my body here and there, nearby whiteness? My body is endlessly defined by outside forces, between servitude and foreignness. My own gaze at myself in the mirror seems untrustworthy. While learning about the Salton Sea's history and how it became an agricultural waste sink, I am confronted with my identity as a Korean American immigrant, a new settler on unceded land. Learning about the Salton Sea also propels me to learn about the land I came from and my migration history.

Working with materials like disposable plastics and looking at the Salton Sea, I reflect on what it means to be an Asian American. This new settler steadily learned to survive by mimicking, constantly acclimating to the storm again and again. These discarded objects and landscapes that embody human ingenuity and sickness represent what I have internalized — The American Dream, an indefatigable desire for progress. The better self, constant evolving of the

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and strategies as an artist. I've also adapted their way of using footnotes to clarify, establish lineage of thoughts and ideas, and for personal anecdotes.

self. Here I am. Still striving. Still desiring. But can I still strive and desire without “colonial desire?”<sup>3</sup> Do I have a “soul of a settler?” What does an anti-colonial<sup>4</sup> art practice look like? What is the difference between survival and survivance? Do I belong here? If I omit “belonging” from the sense of self, how can I re-position myself? I have gone west to resituate myself. To stand firmly in the discomfort, forming questions about my identity in relation to this land and waste. It’s fitting to return to California, where I began my Asian American life as a bewildered teenage girl after spending decades in New York.

This paper traces the ideas that informed my meandering practice over the last three years. My process often feels fractured because I leave things unfinished and move on to another idea. I eventually returned to them and realized how I connect seemingly unrelated materials and subjects. I also used the footnotes to leave reminders for my later self, a placeholder, lest I need to remember how and where the ideas and connections stemmed from. Some anecdotes that felt too personal are also there, which remind me of where I come from but might disturb the flow of the text. Lastly, unless noted, included images are of my work and documented by me.

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<sup>3</sup> Kite, *What’s on the earth is in the stars; and what’s in the stars is on the earth: Lakota Relationships with the Stars and American Relationships with the Apocalypse*.

<sup>4</sup> Liboiron differentiates decolonization and anti-colonial practice in science. They cite Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang’s *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor* to talk about the difference. I am still unpacking these texts and what it means to work under the framework of anticolonial art practice.

## Speak Nearby—The Self

When you decide to speak nearby, rather than speak about, the first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film... Such an approach gives freedom to both sides and this may account for it being taken up by filmmakers who recognize in it a strong ethical stance. By not trying to assume a position of authority in relation to the other, you are actually freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated with such an all-knowing claim and its hierarchies in knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Trinh T. Minh-ha's debut film, *Reassemblage*,<sup>6</sup> begins like any other documentary with the title card: The text "SENEGAL 1981" appears on a black background and Senegalese drum music with distant crowd sounds on the audiotrack, and it takes a good 20 seconds for the first shot to appear, but now there is no sound. After about 25 seconds of a village scene and a man sharpening his tool with muted sound, the narrator says in voiceover: "Scarcely 20 years were enough to make two billion people to define themselves as underdeveloped." Pause. "I do not intend to speak about. Just nearby." Trinh is the narrator who implicates herself as a part of the critique of ethnographic films and fetishization of 'the Other.' The artist is keenly aware of her role as the one gazing at and studying a community's experience. But the artist is making sure that the viewer is also sharply aware of the way spoken words and images are placed, which is often contrary to the norm of standard narration in a documentary at the time. Trinh addresses the viewer to consider how our culture and society may determine our objectivity and subjectivity of 'the Other.' Language can be regarded as a tool not to describe or be analogous to one's experiences but to point to its own inadequacy in transmitting an understanding of a culture or a community.

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<sup>5</sup> *There is No Such Thing as Documentary: An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha* by Erica Balsom for Frieze. <https://www.frieze.com/article/there-no-such-thing-documentary-interview-trinh-t-minh-ha>

<sup>6</sup> Watch at <https://www.kanopy.com/product/reassemblage-0>

While making videos and creating a visual narrative representing various landscapes of the Salton Sea, I have been thinking about what it means to "speak nearby" from a position of "not speaking on their behalf." And what happens if an object seemingly unrelated to the represented landscape is placed nearby? What happens when debris from my life is placed next to the moving images of a landscape seemingly untethered to my life? I am curious how these cuts, from objects to moving images, can form with and inform each other.

In *Minor Feelings* by Cathy Park Hong, Hong writes about the complexity and conflicting Asian American identities. I relate to her Korean American upbringing. Through writing about her experience growing up in a bilingual family and her traversing through academia and the publishing world as a writer, Hong brings up how it might be possible to approach Asian Americanness through Trinh's lens of "speaking nearby." Hong explains how she evades ethnic branding and simultaneously reimagines Asian American identity. She writes:

If I'm going to write nearby my Asian American condition, however, I feel compelled to write nearby other racial experiences. Students have asked me, "How do I write about racial identity without always reacting to whiteness?" The automatic answer is "Tell your story." But this too can be a reaction to whiteness, since white publishers want "the Muslim experience" or "the black experience." They want ethnicity to be siloed because it's easier to understand, easier to brand. Ever since I started writing, I was not just interested in telling my story but also in finding a form—a way of speech—that decentered whiteness. I settled on bad English because, as the artist Gregg Bordowitz said about radical art, it bypasses social media algorithms and consumer demographics by bringing together groups who wouldn't normally be in the same room together.<sup>7</sup>

I settled on working with trash, waste, debris, junk, garbage, plastic, dust, and remains to bypass ethnic branding, also a form of avoidance. Without populating my pieces with human figures, by focusing on material presence, I want to emphasize the assemblage of the self complicit with daily materials. I want the presence of moving images of the Salton Sea to reflect on invisible landscapes engineered to serve us. By using motion sensor sound and lights in my

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<sup>7</sup> Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 80.



installation, the audience's presence and movements trigger awareness of our bodies in relation to discarded objects. But I tread carefully with the awareness of underrepresented bodies and continued violence against people of color. I am confronted with my own privilege when I notice the houseless people scavenging our discards for their temporary protection and sustenance, and the 30 million refugees, and the growing number of modern-day enslaved people, including children<sup>8</sup>, around the world who face daily violence. Thus far, out of uncertainty about my position, I avoid representing bodies and even my own. However, I ask, what can these disposable objects teach us? What do these things say about us? How did we come to accept the normalization of disposability and the violence underpinning our life that is capitalism?<sup>9</sup>

Research-based artworks by Candice Lin and Patty Chang and how they approach their projects inform my practice. I had the good fortune to take a course with Candice Lin at UCLA and learned firsthand how she used materials. Lin weaves footprints of colonialism, racism, and sexism through site-specific multi-sensory installations, juxtaposing locally sourced materials and generating a sense of quotidian intimacy while creating an interiority of a landscape. I am also drawn to her DIY strategies of combining disparate elements and materials, often ephemeral and even whimsical. Inspired by Lin's praxis, which incorporates many studies that manifest in layered complexities in her installations, I aim to approach my practice deliberately considering history and materiality.

For *A Hard White Body, Soft White Worm* (2018, Figure 2),<sup>10</sup> Lin began by doing extensive geopolitical, historical, and material research on the site of the exhibitions. By

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<sup>8</sup> Recently published book, *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* by Siddarth Kara, details the child labor behind our mobile devices containing cobalt to stabilize the lithium battery to last longer and not blow up.

<sup>9</sup> In *Discard Studies* by Josh Lepawsky and Max Liboiron, they state how humans are also "discarded" in our current capitalistic system and relations of power.

<sup>10</sup> Daybell, *Candice Lin*, <https://www.unequalmeasure.org/candice-lin-interview/>

interlacing their own interest in porcelain and its racialized history in Europe (the location of the traveling installation) and merging the seemingly unrelated histories of Jeanne Baret and James Baldwin, Lin creates a soft environment where each material, such as porcelain, detox tea, silk worms co-exist in a speculative narrative. I am also drawn to Lin’s decision-making process, which is felt through how the materials are placed next to each other (Figure 3). It seems strange to bring “trust” into approaching their work. Still, I trust that each of the materials is placed to conjure up something specific, but together, a shamanistic ritual, to unearth the missing past converging with the present that will shape the future.



Figure 2: Candice Lin, *A Hard White Body, Soft White Worm* 2018, Installation View Courtesy of the Artist and Portikus, Frankfurt.



Figure 3: Candice Lin, *A Hard White Body, Soft White Worm*, 2018 Detail. Courtesy of the Artist and Portikus, Frankfurt.



Figure 4: Patty Chang, *Eels*, 2001, Video Still, Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 5: Patty Chang, *The Invocation for a Wandering Lake* (pt. 1), 2011–15, Video still, Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 6 A & B: Patty Chang, *Glass Urinary Devices*, Courtesy of the Artist.<sup>11</sup>

Patty Chang's early videos, such as *Eels* (2001), made me squirmish. I often turned my eyes away while watching the video. In *Eels*, she uses her body creating tension between the represented Asian female body, an object, and the viewer. I feel uncomfortable and challenged when I see her early videos because of her confrontational representation of her body in space without shame. But I envy Chang's bold encounters that doesn't shy away. But her recent 2019

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<sup>11</sup> I am intrigued by these objects. I am also questioning the validity of making an object to look like something else by using different materials. As soon as the familiar plastic patterns that define a disposal water bottle is made with glass, the objects are transformed and enters a different value system.

exhibition and the accompanying catalogue titled, *The Wandering Lake*, struck me differently—gentler in delivery but unapologetically poetic and meandering. The catalogue is like a mixture between a travelogue and a diary tracing the paths of her voyages from 2009-2017 while weaving the history of the places. (Chang 2017) I am learning from this body of work that there is no beginning or an end, but an entry and an exit, more of a flow through time.

I lean on Anna Tsing's, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, to become more specific about Asian American identity.. Tsing closely looks at what lies under the umbrella of Asian American identity and offers an outlook that centers around the possibility of life growing, such as matsutake mushrooms from ruins created by humans. But also how different Asian American communities adapt to the salvage economy.<sup>12</sup> Tsing also demonstrates how different Asian groups are living and foraging the forests, not necessarily erasing their conflicting and hostile history but rather, co-existing on their own terms.<sup>13</sup> Through Tsing's examination of diverse communities of matsutake mushroom foragers in the forest of Oregon, she describes the different assimilative processes for different Asian American groups. For instance, Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes, sent to concentration camps, and stripped of their American identity and possessions during World War II. Tsing writes:

Japanese American matsutake pickers are quite different from Southeast Asian refugees—and I can't explain the difference away by "culture" or by "time" spent in the United States, the usual sociological stories of differences among immigrants. Second-generation Southeast Asian Americans are nothing like Japanese American Nisei in their performance of citizenship. The difference has to do with historical events—indeterminate encounters, if you will—in which relations between immigrant groups and the demands of citizenship are formed. Japanese Americans were subject to coercive assimilation. The camps taught them that to be an American required serious work in transforming oneself from inside out. Coercive assimilation showed me its

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<sup>12</sup> Selling and buying goods at the end of its life.

<sup>13</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 27-34.

contrast: Southeast Asian refugees have become citizens in a moment of neoliberal multiculturalism. A love for freedom may be enough to join the American crowd.<sup>14</sup>

There isn't a monolithic Asian American identity, and I often feel stifled and misunderstood by the term. Ironically, I feel empowered by the political unity but also erased. I see the importance of why Asian Americans need to come together to fight racial inequities and misrepresentations in the US. Moreover, as the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent violence against Asian Americans demonstrated, I was unsurprised how quickly we became foreign again—a mere stereotype that became hypervisible in invisibility.

I come from a land that has geopolitically struggled between Empires for thousands of years. Modern South Korea was formed as a nation after Japanese Colonialism, Korean War, and Vietnam War. And in the eighties, when we immigrated to the US with student visas, South Korea was under a military dictatorship that struggled to redefine national identity and squashed any democratic movements.<sup>15</sup> South Korea's survival as a nation hinged on who its allies were, which is still true today. The 38th parallel line drawn between the North and the South by the US<sup>16</sup> still shapes and determines Korean and diasporic Korean identity.

Memories of my early childhood in rural South Korea are full of holes, but I hold onto them. The visuals of Korea that still live in my body, I admit, are not dependable because the places, as I remember them, do not exist anymore.<sup>17</sup> But, when I moved to Upstate New York in 2007, I started noticing plants and trees that I grew up with in Korea during my hikes, backyards,

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<sup>14</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> How the wars shaped Korea is an accepted modern narrative, but South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War as US's ally is hardly mentioned, according to Viet Thanh Nguyen. He argues that South Korea's economy would not be where it is today if it weren't for its participation in the war, getting paid by the US per soldier to fight alongside US soldiers.

<sup>16</sup> Why we ended up in the US.

<sup>17</sup> When I visited Seoul, Korea in 2007, I learned that rural Anyang, where I lived for a few years, all the houses in my neighborhood had been bulldozed to make room for high rise apartments. My most memorable childhood is buried there.

and side of the road. The brilliant yellows of forsythias in the spring, for instance, my friend's chestnut tree, the wild mugworts but with bigger leaves, and the zelkova trees reminded me of my seasonal childhood life. The summer sounds of cicadas awakening memories of forgotten places. I remember my mom sending me to pick mugworts in the field nearby our house in spring to make rice cakes. They often dyed the rice cake to this earthy green with a tinge of darkness, which added a bitter taste. The chestnut trees that grew in the hills behind the house were where the neighborhood kids used to march together in the fall to open the spikey skin of the fallen chestnuts with our feet, revealing the hard, dark brown skin underneath. These memories mask the collective trauma and hardships of political turmoil in Korea. Still, I welcome these rekindling memories because these experiences offer a glimpse of life before urbanization and migration.

When our family immigrated to the San Fernando Valley in 1981, it felt like the sun rose in the West. The never-ending scorching sunlight reflected never-ending work hours for my parents, and eventually me. Our survival depended on my parents employed with multiple jobs that did not require English fluency. As the eldest, I helped with taking care of my younger siblings and helped my mom at her dry cleaners into my twenties. I touched the residue of PERC (perchloroethylene, a known toxicant) and soiled clothes every day, and my mom still does to this day. As a child, I didn't understand why my mom couldn't find a different profession. I questioned why the clothing industry had to make clothes that needed toxic chemicals to clean. How did this practice become normalized? Who gets to do this line of labor? What are the long-term health effects of these toxicants?<sup>18</sup> And PERC had to be changed every so often.

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<sup>18</sup> I developed a heart problem in my twenties. And I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes recently. There are studies linking exposure to toxicants that will cause bodily harms, but I can't prove that I developed these ailments because I was exposed to toxic chemicals. My mom was also recently diagnosed. But who doesn't have diabetes?



Where did they dump the “dirty” PERC? But these questions came to me much later after I moved away from the Valley to run away from the daily expectation of an immigrant daughter.

The specificity of the origin of my Asian American<sup>19</sup> life seems of non-importance in a land fraught with its history of genocide and chattel slavery. Or, that’s how it feels in my body.<sup>20</sup> Tsing links mono-planting agricultural practices to the “domestication of humans” and how colonization and global capitalism shapes our daily life. Tsing asserts how “the presence of fungi often tells us of the changing practices of being human.”<sup>21</sup> (Tsing, 3) But depending on the specific Asian American groups, each community adapts differently to the economic challenges in the US. I want to extend this definition to include how what we discard and the accumulation of trash can teach and change us. Not only in how our trash is shaping and changing nature but also in how it has entered our psyche.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The term Asian American was coined in the late sixties to unite against racism and to support the Civil Rights Movement. I use both Korean American and Asian American in this paper. Korean American for more specific personal experiences and how it relates to Korean history. And Asian American when it’s more related to American history and when, at times, specific ethnic experiences are erased.

<sup>20</sup> I remember the day that the LA Riot broke out. I was an undergrad at UCLA and all the classes were canceled. I remember the deafening sounds of helicopters. We didn’t have social media. I listened to the news on the radio trying to get a sense of what was happening in LA while stuck on the 405 freeway. When I finally reached my parent’s house in the San Fernando Valley after 5 hours on the freeway, everyone was watching the news about the looting in Koreatown. My parents were horrified and so was I, but for different reasons. I bring up this moment because this was the moment when I felt pulled apart. My parents didn’t understand what was happening and why Korean businesses were targeted. I brought up what happened to Latasha Harlins, brutal beatings of Rodney King, social inequities. They looked at me as if I was a traitor. They said, what about us? What about racism against us? What we have to endure to live here. And why we had to leave Korea in the first place? How can I, as a Korean, side with the looters? I felt a sense of shame of how Korean business owners opened shops in predominantly Black neighborhoods to make money disregarding the social circumstances. My parents were appalled by my lack of understanding of our own struggles and were regretting the decision to bring us to the US. They told me that America has ruined me, the ungrateful daughter. My parents weren’t entirely wrong about my lack of understanding of Korean American struggles from their Korean historical perspective. By that time, I was educated (or not educated) in public schools with limited and skewed American and world history. And much of that learning happened when I was learning English.

<sup>21</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Wish-cycling, for instance, is about when people put things in the recycling bin wishing unrecyclable things were recyclable. In fact, Wish-cycling clogs up the process, and recyclable items end up at a landfill because it becomes too expensive to sort out unrecyclables.



Figure 7: *Gone West*, 2021, Installation view, multi-channel videos with sound, various debris.

### **The Salton Sea —산수 —Mountain Water—Landscape**

“... [the] settlers maintain, shape, manage, and mismanage the nonhuman world, arguing that colonizers have restructure physical landscapes in ways that exert and reinforce processes that are part and parcel of colonial power relations in the United States: Indigenous dispossession, nationalist enclosure, and racial capitalism, as well as environmental degradation.”<sup>23</sup>

When I studied traditional Korean landscape paintings, 산수 (Sansu, literally means mountain water) from the Joseon Dynasty period (1392 to 1897), I focused more on the Confucian philosophy of harmonious relationship with nature. Oftentimes in Sansu ink paintings,

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<sup>23</sup> Boyles, *The Settler Sea*, 6.



human presence is barely recognizable (or none at all) because of scale compared to mountains. And in the absence of bright colors, the ink strokes depicting humans can easily be missed. I used to interpret this as the Eastern tradition of respecting nature, unlike the Western tradition of landscape paintings, especially from the Enlightenment period, where Man takes center stage as a conquerer. But what both traditions have in common is the absence of violence. For instance, during the Joseon period, women's roles were strictly confined to household duties, and subservient to their husbands. This isn't to say women were powerless, but during this period, women's roles were defined, and serious consequences ensued if not followed. Furthermore, the enslavement of their own people flourished, and often nameless, the slaves had little opportunity to change their fate. I wonder, if these landscapes, often painted by the elites, express the idealized harmony between Man and Nature, a form of erasure through defining Man's relationship to Nature as the natural law. Idealized idyllic and pastoral depictions of nature continue to influence how we define nature and the environment as separate from our daily life, both urban and rural.<sup>24</sup> And how we define nature determines where waste sinks and landfills end up.<sup>25</sup>

The more I work with different materials, I am constantly negotiating with myself to consider what materials I can use. That also includes exploring landscapes such as the Salton Sea. I think about my methods in how I access the Salton Sea to 'explore' to do 'research' when these two dominant academic methods have their roots in colonialism. To be transparent, I didn't know what I was getting myself into when I followed the agricultural waste stream to the sea. Now that I am more aware of the complicated land relations and the ongoing violence in the

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<sup>24</sup> It's too generalized. Get more specific.

<sup>25</sup> This opinion is based on observations, and have not done extensive research yet.

desert, I realize I need to change my methods and rethink how and what I share in the academic setting and beyond. My observation and the purpose of learning about the environment now seem unsustainable.<sup>26</sup> For now, here's a brief history of the Salton Sea and its paradoxical existence.

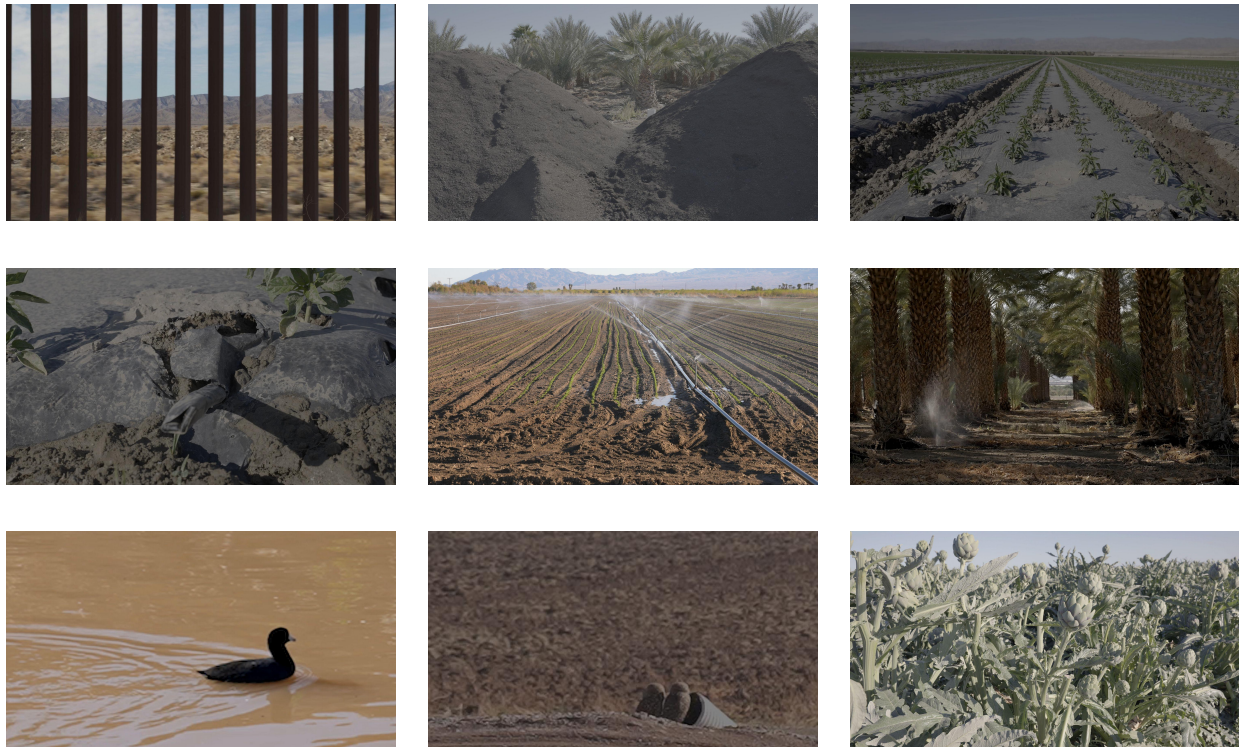


Figure 8: Video stills from *Gone West*, 2021

Located in the desert in Imperial Valley about 127 miles northeast of San Diego, the Salton Sea teeters between destruction and preservation of the land and water. Once called “Lake Cahuilla,” the engineer William Phipps Blake permanently changed the name to The Salton Sea (Voyles xiii), ushering in the new age in 1909. The name Lake Cahuilla can be said to describe the land before the new settlers dreamed of creating an agricultural mecca by channeling water from the Colorado River. The Indigenous people of Cahuilla and other Indigenous people used to

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<sup>26</sup> What is my purpose? This question came up when I had a studio visit with Postcommodity. They suggested that get clarity before I approach the people of Cahuilla.

come and go as the Salton Sink filled and dried up, never imagining engineering the Colorado River to suit their needs. Instead, Indigenous people came and went, adapting to the water flow to the sink.<sup>27</sup>

As the drought continues and the threat of the Colorado River drying up looms over the Imperial Valley, the chance of their only source of freshwater disappearing is real. Numerous farms, such as for palm dates, alfalfa sprouts, and artichokes, depend on the water siphoned from the Colorado River through the All American Canal. About 90% of the vegetables distributed in the United States in winter come from farms near the Salton Sea. Imperial Valley is the home of both conventional and organic farming. Cal Organics have farms near the sea, for instance. We are witnessing what Max Liboiron calls “bad Land relations” resulting from the continuation of colonial practices that produces violence.<sup>28</sup> Because in order to “fix” this water shortage, there will have to be more human interventions that will most likely continue to harm those who are already affected.

The Salton Sea's most significant issue is no freshwater circulation. The only outlet is through evaporation, skyward. The only water sources for replenishing the sea are rare rainfalls and agricultural runoff carrying pesticides and waste from nearby farms. As a result, shorelines have been receding for decades, exposing layers of toxicants<sup>29</sup> like DDT and caprolactam from plastic waste that has been quietly dormant underwater.<sup>30</sup> And with the wind, exposed fine dust gets picked up, mingling with the air, which can be harmful to people and animals. Because of the uncertainty of “letting nature take its course” means for the local residents and its ecosystem, the proposed solution often involves more human geoengineering.

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<sup>27</sup> Boyles, *The Settler Sea*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> How? Keep working on this.

<sup>29</sup> Difference between toxins and toxicants, learn more about why this distinction matter, per Max Liboiron.

<sup>30</sup> <https://sites.sandiego.edu/sdpollutiontrackers/2019/11/25/624/>

Before the effects of the built-up hydrogen sulfide killed off the fish in the '70s, the Salton Sea was promoted as the Salton Riviera in the late '50s and '60s. (Fig. 3) It was a vacation spot for white middle and upper middle class families for fun and recreation—a refreshing getaway from the toils of their jobs and the busy life back home, like Los Angeles. Even celebrities like Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack could be seen on luxury boats on the lake. They were still building vacation homes and resorts in the '70s but eventually, people abandoned their vacation homes, and real estate developers jumped ship too.<sup>31</sup> The promotional videos selling the affordable “American Dream” in the desert have been replaced by signs today offering lots for just \$2,000 or \$4,000 two years ago, now \$10,000 to \$15,000—a steal!

For the last decade, California has promised millions of dollars to save the lake and rejuvenate its surroundings in the process, but the restoration effort has been tied up in typical bureaucratic stagnation. I wonder why has the cleanup or revival effort been lackluster, if not stifled. Is it because 86% of the residents of the Imperial Valley are Latin Americans?<sup>32</sup> The descendants of Cahuilla Natives also reside at The Torres-Martinez Reservation. And the map that I got from the information center, clearly from the days when people could still go fishing at the Salton Sea, the Reservation isn't even marked. Furthermore, when you watch documentaries<sup>33</sup> about the Salton Sea, it is portrayed as predominantly caucasian in the populace, but that's not the case at all.

Meanwhile, the new controversial development of lithium extraction from the Salton Sea through geothermal technology is underway. Lithium batteries will serve the car industry by creating "eco-friendly" vehicles, and geothermal energy is also considered an ecological solution

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<sup>31</sup> Watch *The Salton Sea - Desert Saga* at <https://ucsd.kanopy.com/video/salton-sea-desert-saga>

<sup>32</sup> Cart, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Watch *Plagues & Pleasures on the Salton Sea* at <https://www.amazon.com/Plagues-Pleasures-Salton-Sonny-Bono/dp/B0015B1UIC>

to producing energy for human consumption. These enormous extracting ventures always start with the argument that they will create new jobs and benefit the local economy. But what good would this growth do when people living on-site are getting sick with asthma and dying now? The promised restoration of the Salton Sea is just that, at this point, a promise. Moreover, the new lithium ventures would likely further damage the environs and supplant an already dire water shortage with a further siphoning of a much-needed and precious resource. Lithium mining uses up to 500 million gallons of water for each ton of lithium mined. Lithium mining is not a restorative process for the Salton Sea but the furtherance of the destruction of birds and pollinators' natural and critical migration paths.<sup>34</sup> However, where should we get our energy to power our homes, vehicles, and everything that supports our life?

If the Salton Sea is left to evaporate, its fate will be like the nearby Owen's lake. Instead of a 10 million dollar restoration project, it will require billions of dollars to keep the toxic lake bed from mixing with the air and harming more people and its ecosystem.<sup>35</sup> The efforts to create supposed ecologically friendlier energy create a cesspool of harmful waste and toxic waste by-products. Even relatively recent geothermal companies set up in the Salton Sea area as "environmentally friendly energy sources" have been cited for not complying with waste disposal guidelines.<sup>36</sup>

I am drawn to this paradoxical landscape that is both life-sustaining and energy-rich but also teetering on environmental catastrophe. It's also where Manifest Destiny, the American Dream, is actively playing out. My videos from the Salton Sea, some included in the installation *Gone West* (2021), focused on the moving images of water, farmscapes, and migrating birds. The

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<sup>34</sup> Cart, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> More information at <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/sea-worth-salt/>

<sup>36</sup> Cart, 2021.

<https://localnewsmatters.org/2021/02/25/salton-sea-will-californias-desert-be-transformed-into-lithium-valley/>

videos were placed juxtaposed nearby the plastic debris I've been collecting. I wanted to draw material connections between my life and the Salton Sea and how we are tethered to invisible labor and landscape.

But as I mentioned earlier, I am rethinking how I access the Salton Sea and the purpose of this project. Now that I've stood nearby the Salton Sea for a couple of years, I want to approach with a local guide the communities of farmers, migrants, engineers, environmentalists, and the Indigenous people. I want to go beyond the Salton Sea's metaphorical representation to explore my identity. But now, I want to approach this research by directly engaging with the residents and learning about their perspective on the land they inhabit while I look to artists like Carolina Caycedo. I aspire to follow her sound and ethical methodologies when she collaborates with Indigenous communities affected by extractive mining practices, guided by the question, how can we treat each other and our environment better? Caycedo approaches her practice with communities as "spiritual field work," moving away from the traditional ethnographic research methods of being neutral. Instead, she imbues her research with a personal and spiritual practice that connects the artist with the community establishing relationships.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Souter, *Carolina Caycedo's Spiritual Fieldwork*, <https://hyperallergic.com/782555/carolina-caycedos-spiritual-fieldwork/> Janelle Iglesias turned me to her practice. As I get ready to embark on a new journey in South Korea on a Fulbright Research Grant, I want to approach the agricultural community with Caycedo's "spiritual field work" in mind.



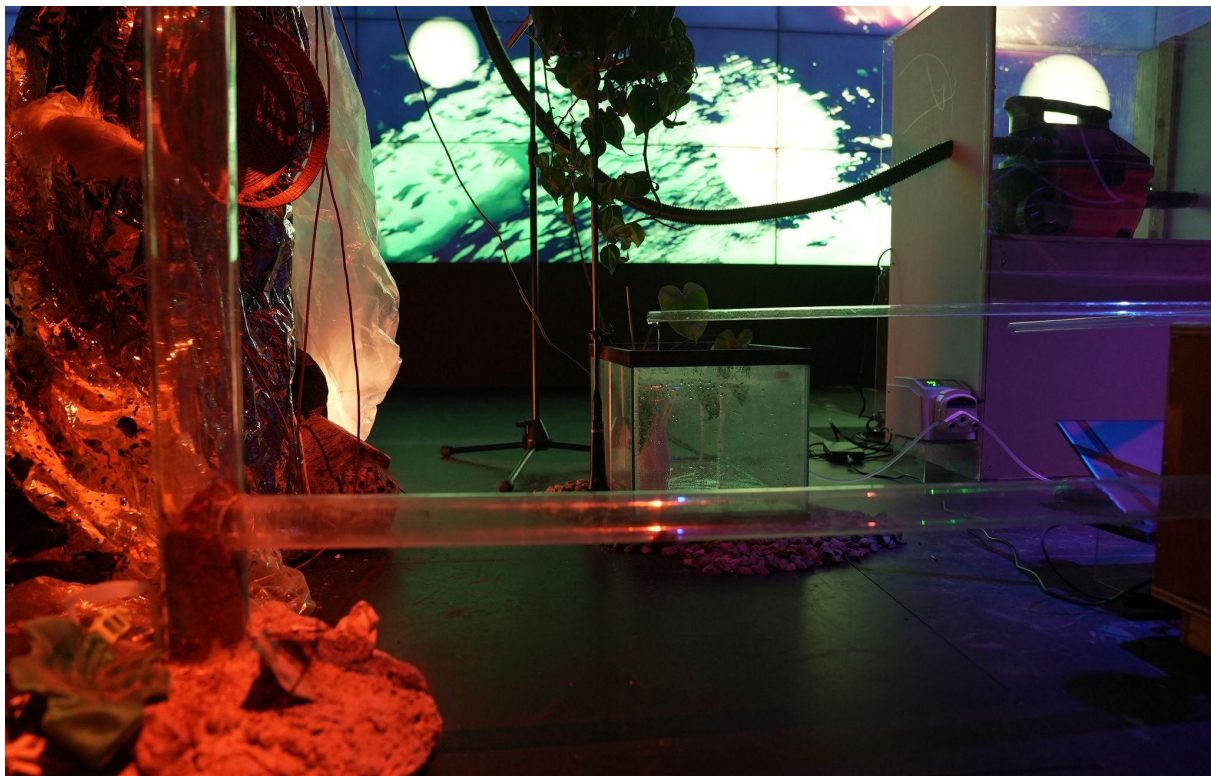
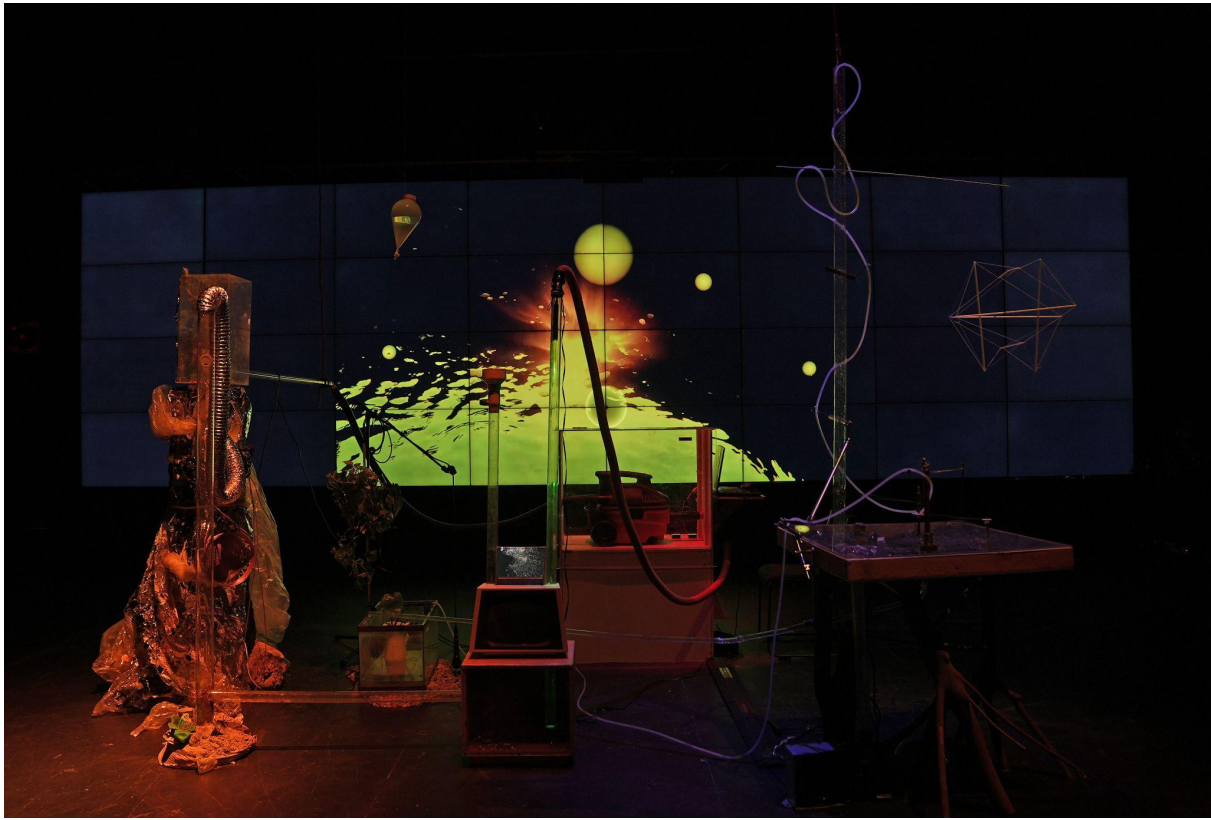


Figure 9 A & B: *Everything is Dust*, 2023, Installation views, Qualcomm Institute, UCSD

## **Everything is Dust**

*Everything is Dust* is a collaborative project with two geochemists at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, Dr. Sarah Aarons, an isotope geochemist, and Ph.D. candidate Emmet Norris from her lab, and a multi-media artist Victor Castaneda H. I became interested in studying dust particles because of how they come into play at the Salton Sea. Dust also points to layers of time. Dust particles become stones and mountains and feed phytoplanktons depending on where they come from and where they are taken by the wind. But this isn't something we can "see" or experience in our lifetime. This is geologic time.

In places like the Salton Sea, where the water supply has ceased, wind abrades the exposed sea playa and transports dust particles that contain unhealthy amounts of toxic chemicals such as cadmium and others present in pesticides, causing asthma and other respiratory ailments for local residents. As noted by Hannah Holmes in *The Secret Life of Dust* in 2001, our world can be understood through a grain of dust that travels far and wide without borders. But how do we study and visualize something mostly invisible, like dust particles? Sarah and Emmet used data from dust particles collected in local regions near San Diego and researched dust preserved in Antarctic ice more than 130,000 years ago. They analyze the composition and concentration of dust to understand and interpret the Earth's climate history.

Together, we collaborated on a speculative visual/aural art project tracing the movements of dust particles in real time. Using the same scientific instrument that collects dust in the atmosphere, *Everything is Dust* metaphorically and abstractly visualizes how we share and interact with the invisible layers of dust particles. Through an immersive installation consisting of real-time video feeds, data visualizations, and sound interlaced with archival material of dust,



we presented our interactive project at the Qualcomm Institute's Calit2' Black Box' Theater in March 2023. On the opening night, Sarah shared:

Dust is all around us all the time. With its small size—most particles are smaller than the width of human hair—It may seem insignificant. Dust is an invisible powerhouse in the sense that it can fertilize ecosystems that are missing nutrients, can influence the intensity of light reaching Earth's surface, is linked to the formation of atmospheric river events, and when inhaled by humans, can lead to adverse health outcomes. Dust is constantly lifted up from dry, arid regions and transported around the globe using wind as its vehicle. When it's deposited in the ocean or on ice sheets and glaciers, it is preserved, and we can determine its source to reconstruct major wind patterns in the past. In our group, we study the minute chemical differences in dust to trace where it originated from. We combine field collection with clean lab chemistry to separate the elements and isotopes we are interested in measuring. Much of this work is solitary, and we have been unable to share our experiences and moods in the field and during data collection until now.

I intentionally embarked on this collaboration with geochemists for a few reasons. First, I wanted to know more about their process, how they interpret their findings, and how they compare to mine. Second, what are the questions geochemists are asking about dust particles? Third, how do they want to disseminate their research to a broader audience? Fourth, what do they want to communicate about dust concerning a larger question about climate change? Moreover, I wanted to expand my knowledge about dust beyond what I can access as an artist. Finally, how can this collaboration broaden our understanding of an environment deemed as toxic, like the Salton Sea?

Our conversations have centered around the definition of dust. Its meaning and composition vary greatly depending on its origin and how and where dust travels. Norris sees dust as a time recorder in-depth and our project as a space between the record and its recorder. Dr. Aarons' research lies in tracing dust's origin to determine wind patterns in the past. Dust is a vehicle for time traveling to speculate the past's climate. I wanted to relate to dust in a quotidian manner, the way most of us see dust in our immediate surrounding as something dirty, something to remove from our homes.

The highlight of the installation was a modified vacuum in an enclosed box with two dust particle readers or digital universal particle sensors. The vacuum enclosure served two purposes: One, to reduce the loud sound it produced when it was running, and second, to keep the dust level concentrated in a tight, enclosed space. We created a closed loop system using clear poly tubing connected to the two ends of the vacuum and ultimately connecting to the box of debris. The two dust particle readers, connected to Arduino, which is connected to a computer, were constantly sensing the particles in the air more diminutive than the thickness of our hair: 0.3, 0.5, 1.0, 2.5, 5, 10 micrometers. The sensors use the laser scattering principle, “i.e., produce scattering by using a laser to radiate suspending particles in the air, then collect scattering light [to] a certain degree, and finally obtain the curve of scattering light change with time. In the end, equivalent particle diameter and the number of particles with different diameter[s] per unit volume can be calculated by microprocessor based on MIE theory.”<sup>38</sup> To digitize and visually represent the data, we depended on instruments and technologies without understanding how they operate. This is also true for our daily life, which depends on technologies, engineering, and inventions we barely know or understand.

I learned how to use the Touchdesigner software to visually interpret the constantly changing data. Each sulfur yellow circle on the screen (Figure 9 A) represented a dust particle size of 0.3, 1.0, 2.5, 5, and 10 micrometers, reacting to changing particle numbers in the air. Another data set was transmitted to another laptop to produce sound using the program, Max8. Whenever the reader sensed a particle, the circle would enlarge. What was fascinating was we could see on the screen that more dust particles were present after we turned off the vacuum. We surmised that the vent on the vacuum created rapid air movements, either kicking up the particles

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<sup>38</sup> [https://www.aqmd.gov/docs/default-source/aq-spec/resources-page/plantower-pms5003-manual\\_v2-3.pdf](https://www.aqmd.gov/docs/default-source/aq-spec/resources-page/plantower-pms5003-manual_v2-3.pdf)

or, while larger particles are trapped in the vacuum, the finer particles exited through the vent, or both!

The vacuum<sup>39</sup> was significant to me because it represented everydayness and DIY aesthetics, using what was available. But the vacuum also plays a role as a mediator or a temporary collector until the mixed bag of dust is transported somewhere else, most likely to a landfill. Ninety-nine percent of the material we used for the physical, object-oriented installation came from a room full of obsolete and disused scientific equipment and materials used in a lab. Using debris to move finer particles in a circular motion until they settle temporarily. I wanted to reemphasize how nothing, even dust, doesn't vanish; instead, they relocate. They settle. They become with another being. I wanted to express the enormity of a single speck of invisible dust as Reza Nagrestani put it potently, "Each particle of dust carries with it a unique vision of matter, movement, collectivity, interaction, affect, differentiation, composition, and infinite darkness."<sup>40</sup>

One of the most challenging parts about collaborating with scientists was finding time to work together. What does it mean to collaborate? Is it about dividing the labor equally? My early conversations with Sarah laid the foundation and guided me with my questions about dust, but the ongoing dialogue and the physical labor of assembling the moving pieces over time happened more with Emmet. Victor joined much later to add another perspective, the sound. We barely had time to scratch the surface. If anything, I have more questions than answers to my earlier questions. I also had moments of crisis of interpreting the data. How do I know these sensing readers are not faulty? Am I analyzing the data accurately? Is it essential that the numbers are

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<sup>39</sup>The first vacuum was invented by an asthmatic James Spangler in 1908. He sold his broom machine to Hoover and eventually became a popular household item after World War II.  
<https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/everyday-wonders/invention-vacuum-cleaner#:~:text=Asthmatic%20American%20inventor%20James%20Spangler,to%20William%20Hoover%20in%201908.&text=His%20invention%20proved%20to%20be,truly%20practicable%20domestic%20vacuum%20cleaner.>

<sup>40</sup> Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*.

represented accurately visually and aurally? It was crucial to me that these numbers are represented visually because these particles are so miniscule our eyes can't detect them. I wanted to show that these invisible particles were here, intermingling with us. We breathe in invisible particles, like microplastics, passing through and settling somewhere in our bodies.

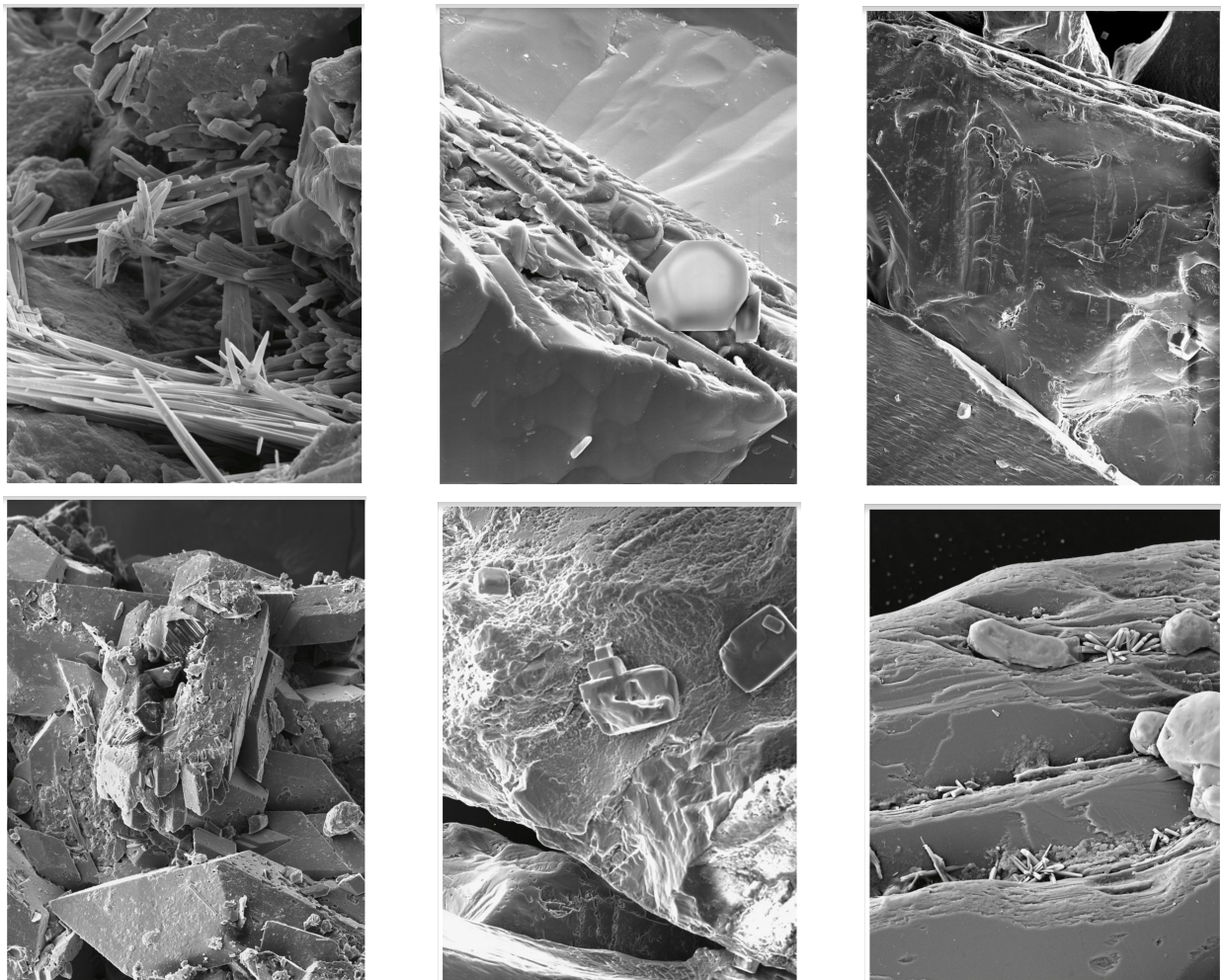


Figure 10: Anya Gallaccio, *plain as your eyes can see*, 2011, Group of six archival pigment prints on cotton rag paper, 10  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8 in, each.

For the group of six prints, *plain as your eyes can see* (2011), Anya Gallaccio worked with scientists to capture the microscopic images of dust. The zoomed-in images of the specks of dust you can see on your fingertip look more like a mountain crag, a landscape fragment. In a

way, a speck of dust that the artist collected from the desert, is a fragment of a place, a landscape. We get a sense from the microscopic images how enormous dust is. What would this speck look like to an ant? What makes a place?

Gallaccio often collaborates with other experts for her projects, which is crucial for her. But ultimately, she sees the final outcome as hers. There is no question of authorship because "it would be very different if someone else authored it. She tries "to stretch the parameters of what they think is possible or appropriate."<sup>41</sup> In an informal conversation, she said there's a difference between a collaboration and an expert advising the artist.

I am less sure about authorship.<sup>42</sup> There were elements of the installation included that I would have omitted, but I wanted different voices to be present, even if it meant that I disagreed with certain choices. We pushed each other's boundaries and widened our parameters beyond our comfort zones, informing our decisions. Even for solo projects, many of my decisions develop through reading, studio visits, and conversations. How can I claim authorship by acknowledging the assemblage of ideas or even as an assemblage of a person?

However, for the next iteration of *Everything is Dust*, I would like more clarity on the division of labor and define, with flexibility, the framework of the collaboration amongst the members. How do we collaborate when our methodologies are vastly different? As an artist, I have much more leeway in approaching the subject from many perspectives. On the other hand, geochemists' research and methods are expected to be specific and microscopic in scope.

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<sup>41</sup> Gallaccio et. al., *Anya Gallaccio*, 237.

<sup>42</sup> I accidentally found a Qualcomm Institute webpage with 58 pictures of *Everything is Dust* installation and a video. I remember seeing a photographer and a videographer at the opening event. There were individual pictures of all the collaborators, and not a single picture of me. There was one group picture. I was surprised and caught off guard when I felt anger welling up in my throat and I felt petty. I could hear my inner voice trying to convince myself that this is not a big deal. Let it go. Your presence is felt in the work. The feeling of invisibility, a picture, even a bad one, would have made me feel seen. Is authorship about being seen? Or is it about asserting authorship?

Furthermore, how do we navigate within an institutional space that heavily invests in STEM and less in Humanities and the Arts? How can we directly address the gender, race, and colonial aspect of dust?<sup>43</sup> This was my first collaboration with scientists and one of the reasons why I wanted to pursue my MFA at a research institution. I am excited at the prospect of maintaining the relationship we forged and continuing to address the questions because we have just begun to scratch the surface. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, two seemingly opposed forms of knowledge can cross-pollinate, creating new relations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Dr. Wayne K. Yang thinks that the project is missing the gender, race, and colonial aspect of dust and how the authorship question is related to how institutions are gendered and racialized spaces.

<sup>44</sup> Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 46.





Figure 11: *Plastic Galaxy*, 2020–23, Ongoing studio installation

## Plastic Galaxy—Things in Space

...scales of harm and violence in what Michelle Murphy calls alterlife, or “the condition of being already co-constituted by material entanglements with water, chemicals, soil, atmospheres, microbes, and built environments, and also the condition of being open to ongoing becoming. Hence, alterlife is already recompaailed, pained, and damaged, but has potentiality nonetheless. If life holds together tensions between violence and possibility, braiding the organic and inorganic, body and land, and resides in the indistinctions between infrastructures and ecologies, recognizing alterlife attends also to openness, to a potential for recomposition that exceeds the ongoing aftermaths.<sup>45</sup>

I have a growing collection of trash in my studio that I named *Plastic Galaxy*. They move around in my 250 sq ft space, always looming behind me. When I began my collection here at UCSD starting in the summer of 2020, I tried to collect ALL trash from my life as long as they were not food scraps. It quickly proved to be quite depressing and oppressive. I changed tactics to collect items that caught my attention for whatever reason. Usually, they were shiny wrappers and many plastic objects, remnants, and fragments of another artist’s materials. With the abundance of plastic debris at UCSD, my life, and the Salton Sea, I wanted to learn why and how plastic became so ubiquitous.

I am interested in examining the entangled history and meaning behind everyday plastic objects and our relationship to these non-human matters. Using the strategies of assemblages, *Plastic Galaxy* explores what Jussi Prikka describes in *A Geology of Media* as “the systematic laboratorization of everyday culture” and how “the mundane is produced through a mix of the archaic underworld and the refined scientific process.”<sup>46</sup> *Plastic Galaxy* is a catalyst for self-reflection and closely investigating my consumer behavior intimately connected to a system of production, consumption, and corporate extractive practices. *Plastic Galaxy* also represents

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<sup>45</sup> Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, 89.

<sup>46</sup> Paprika, *A Geology of Media*, viii.



the contradictory nature of plastic as both ephemeral and disposable, but also as eternal and foreverness, to borrow Donna Haraway's term, "becoming-with"<sup>47</sup> the landscape.

I see plastic everywhere, strewn on the side of the highways or along my hikes on "nature trails." I am also interested in plastic's aesthetic qualities, like when the sun hits the surface of a plastic bottle and how it glistens, or when I notice the large black sheets of plastic covering the side of a hill and on farms, catching my gaze and wonderment for its purpose. In these moments, these objects have what Jane Bennett calls "thing-power" and "reveal how cultural practices produce what is experienced as "natural."<sup>48</sup> I am also interested in engaging with these plastic things as having agency out in the world and how these things ultimately are not thrown away. Instead, once discarded, they are relocated, transported to recycling centers or a landfill, another country, or repurposed. They synthesize with other materials to transform into something else, very slowly, beyond our lifetime—omnipresent and nearly eternal. These human-made objects, this human-made material, were never distinct from nature, to begin with—and likely, never will be distinct beyond us.

The plastic objects I use daily represent my desire. When I have goals and deadlines to make things, to participate in life, I rush around to quickly satisfy my hunger and thirst, creating more plastic consumption. Since the pandemic began, I let go of my self-imposed Amazon order restrictions. My orders of books to household items grew exponentially, which also meant more plastic and paper packaging materials, not to mention energy consumption due to more online activities and deliveries. Plastic objects also remind me how these objects' properties are mysterious and magical, just like any being. The way plastic's properties can multiply and

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<sup>47</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

<sup>48</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 1.

replicate any form, and even scenes (Disneyland made with fiberglass, for example-image?)<sup>49</sup> exemplifies how every crevice of my home is tethered to a plastic item.

My life also depends on plastic to keep functioning in this modern world. I have a tiny pacemaker made of plastic, metal, and a battery. The pacemaker,<sup>50</sup> shaped and molded like a flat pebble encasing the battery, is tucked under my muscle between the collar and chest bones that send tiny, adjustable electrical shocks to keep the heart beating at a rate that supports my activities. The battery has to be replaced every 10 years or so, and my latest replacement even has a wi-fi receiver that connects remotely to my doctors. I get a bill every few months reminding me that it's still ticking.

The plastic component of my pacemaker is crucial because otherwise, it would have been sharper, heavier, and bulkier metal casing. Naturally repelling water, the plastic case also repels blood. If I opted out of implanting the pacemaker in my twenties, I probably would have lived a slower, shorter life on endless medications. Everything would have taken much longer, even digesting food, for instance. Dancing? I would have had to move in slow motion to match my low, irregular heart rate. My life is a product of this temporality and technological advancements, where multiple elements and inventions were melded together to lengthen millions of lives in the last thirty-plus years. What is twisted about this prolonged life is that my body will decompose alongside the non-biodegradable toxic battery and plastic casing even after my passing. Although scientists have discovered a fungal strain<sup>51</sup> and microorganisms<sup>52</sup> that can break down plastic (in

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<sup>49</sup> "Cinderella Castle," Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, May 30, 2021), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinderella\\_Castle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinderella_Castle).

<sup>50</sup> Medtronic, "Types of Pacemakers," Medtronic, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.medtronic.com/us-en/patients/treatments-therapies/pacemakers/options-types.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Sheldrake, *Entangled Life*, 175-201.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/can-microorganisms-solve-our-plastic-waste-problem/a-53258985#>.

the early stages of experimentation), my desire to return to earth<sup>53</sup>—a romantic notion of death, is a little more complicated for now. But these organisms would have to break down an immense amount of plastic. About 300 million tonnes of plastic are produced every year, exponentially growing. And if organisms can break down all these plastics that we produce, what's to stop them from eating away plastic used for structures? <sup>54</sup> What can possibly go wrong?

Our lives have drastically changed since the discovery and invention of synthetic plastic, Bakelite, in 1907.<sup>55</sup> Starting in the 1930s, chemical companies like Dupont have pushed plastics "as a driving force towards the democratization of material goods." Plastic symbolized material abundance that brought convenience and comfort to anyone, regardless of their class status.<sup>56</sup> But, now, the images of abundance, single-use culture introduced in the sixties, have been replaced with images of a floating island of degrading plastic things known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch or Plastic Soup. The unforgettable images of a decomposing bird's exposed innards to a sea turtle's body deformed by plastic six-pack rings that banded together canned beverages are replayed and ingrained in my head, emblematic of the suffering associated with the overproduction and overconsumption of plastic objects. Moreover, scientists recently discovered microplastic in the placenta and are studying the effects of microplastic, nanoplastic, and leachate in human bodies and the environment. Essentially, plastic is everywhere, in our ocean, rivers, soil, food, animals, and our body, signaling the arrival of the geologic era of the

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<sup>53</sup> Aboris, "Hudson Valley Could Soon Allow Human Composting," 101.5 WPDH, May 26, 2021, <https://wpdh.com/hudson-valley-could-soon-allow-recycling-of-dead-loved-ones/>.

<sup>54</sup> Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, 102-103.

<sup>55</sup> The invention of plastic was spurred even earlier than the Bakelite invention. Men were killing elephants to use the tusks for making billiard balls which drove the elephants to extinction. To find a suitable alternative, a company started a competition. This eventually led to the discovery of celluloid, the first volatile plastic. Read more about it here: <https://plastics-themag.com/The-first-plastic-It-all-started-with-a-billiard-ball>

<sup>56</sup> Jennifer Gabrys et al., "Plastics, Materials and Dreams of Dematerialization," in *Accumulation: the Material Politics of Plastic*, 19.

Anthropocene, the term introduced by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, marking the here and now of the dystopian future.<sup>57</sup>

In 2013, Spacecraft Cassini, while orbiting Saturn through an infrared spectrometer, detected propylene near Titan, Saturn's moon, the second largest moon known to us. We touch propylene every day.<sup>58</sup> Conor Nixon, A planetary scientist at Nasa who studies the atmospheric composition of the outer planets, explained, "This chemical is all around us in everyday life, strung together in long chains to form a plastic called polypropylene. That plastic container at the grocery store with the recycling code 5 on the bottom— that's polypropylene."<sup>59</sup> According to one article, propylene in Titan's atmosphere is not from the earth's waste stream.<sup>60</sup> Since the first broadcast of man landing on the moon, we now live among a multitude of images from space and analysis of space matter, confirming that we are made of star stuff. Furthermore, the images of planets, stars, and galaxies have almost become mundane, to the point perhaps we no longer need to look up at the night sky that looks nothing like the spectacular images of space. Human ingenuity and technological advancement make everything and everywhere seem reachable. Plastic is made with space and ancient matter, death. I hear a small voice saying, so what, aren't we all?

The quality of black plastic sheets reminds me of their origin, petroleum. Although often used for camouflaging our waste, the slick, shiny surface of the black plastic sheet beckons my attention when I notice them on hills, on farms, for instance. It is unfathomable that plastic is a byproduct of a substance that took hundreds of millions of years to form. I can hardly imagine

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<sup>57</sup> Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> "GMS: Propylene on Titan," NASA (NASA), accessed June 11, 2021, <https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/11339>.

<sup>59</sup> "NASA's Cassini Spacecraft Finds Ingredient of Household Plastic in Space," NASA (NASA), accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/news/nasas-cassini-spacecraft-finds-ingredient-of-household-plastic-in-space>.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Todd, "Now We've Found Plastics in Space (and It's Not Pollution)," *Pacific Standard* (Pacific Standard, September 30, 2013), <https://psmag.com/environment/now-weve-found-plastics-space-pollution-67345>.

100 years in a span of time. Plastic, essentially, represents the earth's history, life, and death. So, how did material made with ancient dead matter, star-stuff, becoming and preserved for millions of years, morph into single-use, disposable objects fated to end up in a landfill and redefining what it means to be a bottom dweller of the ocean or an errant craft helplessly afloat on the ocean's natural current?<sup>61</sup>

I digress here a bit to consider Eugene Thacker's essay titled, *Black Infinity; or, Oil Discovers Humans*, analyzing Fritz Leiber's short horror story, "Black Gondolier." As the essay's title suggests, Leiber's short story turns the table around on the usual human discovery narrative and proposes that it was oil that discovered man. Thacker writes, "The image of oil as stealthily waiting gives the ooze the vague quality of intelligence and intent—and, more specifically, of malefic intent."<sup>62</sup> In other words, humans are just another victim of oil's intent on "guid[ing] humans and even enforced the development of modern technological civilization...",<sup>63</sup> says the main character Daloway who is obsessed with oil. To keep this digression succinct, I conjured up this image of oil having agency to consider Thacker's essay pointing to "unknowability of the unhuman is expressed through a litany of baroque descriptors, all of which ultimately fail to inscribe the unhuman within human thought and language."<sup>64</sup> Imagining oil as an entity with agency, or any non-human species, is like tripping on the same rock over and over again. No matter what, it is impossible to discuss the "unknowability of the unhuman" outside the human

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<sup>61</sup> "Scientists Name New Deep-Sea Species Eurythenes Plasticus to Highlight Pollution," WWF, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.wwf.org.au/news/news/2020/scientists-name-new-deep-sea-species-eurythenes-plasticus-to-highlight-pollution#gs.30isjy>.

<sup>62</sup> Thacker, "Black Infinity: or, Oil Discovers Humans," in *Leper Creativity: Cyclonopedia Symposium*, 174.

<sup>63</sup> Thacker, "Black Infinity: or, Oil Discovers Humans," in *Leper Creativity: Cyclonopedia Symposium*, 175.

<sup>64</sup> Thacker, "Black Infinity: or, Oil Discovers Humans," in *Leper Creativity: Cyclonopedia Symposium*, 177.

language. However, it gives pause to a human-centric, anthropocentric hierarchical narrative of man conquering nature.<sup>65</sup>

Watching on screens the images of birds covered in viscous, slick oil during the massive BP oil spill in 2010 was the first time I woke up to the horrors of our power-hungry, mobility-driven modern life.<sup>66</sup> Up to this point, I was pretty well shielded from the reality of the extraction of resources, and the devastating extractive practices that destroy habitats and Indigenous communities worldwide. For instance, in 2021, Anishinaabe activists and allies, AKA Water Protectors, were protesting against the Line #3 pipeline projects that will move 915,000 barrel-a-day tar sands from Canada and cut through the treaty land in Minnesota.<sup>67</sup> Indigenous communities in both North and South America have been organizing and fighting for food and land sovereignty for years. For Kyle Powys Whyte, a Neshnabé (Potawatomi) and scholar-activist at the University of Michigan, Indigenous communities are not fighting for what's to come, rather Indigenous people are inhabiting “what [their] ancestors would have understood as a dystopian future. Indeed, settler colonial campaigns in the Great Lakes region have already depleted, degraded, or irreversibly damaged the ecosystems, plants, and animals that [their] ancestors had local living relationships with for hundreds of years and that are the material anchors of [their] contemporary customs, stories, and ceremonies.”<sup>68</sup>

The terms like Anthropocene, or Hyperobjects coined by Timothy Morton, conjure up ungraspable images or futures far removed from daily life. Working with plastic things from my life and around my environment as material tethered to tentacular fossilized oil represents our

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<sup>65</sup> Need more literary context, as suggested by Dr. Alena Williams, UCSD.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Shuppli's text would work here, but I don't know how to tie it in yet. Dr. Alena Williams, UCSD, also suggested it.

<sup>67</sup> “Not Having It”: Winona LaDuke on Mass Protest by Water Protectors to Halt Line 3 Pipeline in Minnesota,” Democracy Now! [https://www.democracynow.org/2021/6/8/line\\_3\\_protests\\_treaty\\_people\\_gathering](https://www.democracynow.org/2021/6/8/line_3_protests_treaty_people_gathering).

<sup>68</sup> Whyte, “Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, 206-215.

intimacy with the material choking animals and our environment. A mountain-like shape made with the black plastic sheet is a dominant visual of the ongoing sculptural assemblage of the *Plastic Galaxy (Mountain)* installation. At the base of this metaphorical 'mountain,' various plastic objects once used as a preserver, a holder of food that sustains my life, are forming and changing the plastic landscape through accumulation.

Everything we make ends up somewhere on Earth or in the atmosphere. Once the materials amalgamate to become a thing, like a plastic bottle, it exists in this new form until it breaks down and transforms into microplastics and mixes with other elements, like water, soil, and air. And everything we make creates waste. The ordinary dust gathering on a window sill at home can tell us what we've been cooking, what we are wearing, and where we live. In the last chapter of *Discard Studies*, Joseph Leawski and Max Liboiron state that it's impossible to eradicate discards. Instead, they ask, how can we discard well?<sup>69</sup> This loaded question also beckons me to ask, how can we produce well?

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<sup>69</sup> Lepawski, Liboiron, *Discard Studies*, 123.



Figure 12: A page from the artist's book, *You Are Every-where*,<sup>70</sup> 2022

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<sup>70</sup> I learned how to make handbound artist books from Lorena Gomez-Mostajo at UCSD. This new skill allowed for a different type of tactility and layering, or stratifying images with variety of debris.





Figure 13 A & B: *out of place* Thesis exhibition views, 2023

## Out of Place

My thesis installation, *out of place*, was born out of exhaustion. As my MFA neared the end, my life turned upside down with unexpected family mishaps and health issues. These unforeseen events compelled me to consider what it means to care for myself, my family, and the objects around me. These questions were already swirling in my head from our collective COVID-19 experience that redefined how we shared public spaces. Our framed talking heads became the norm for over a year, leaving us feeling out of place. I also wanted the title, *out of place*, to convey multiple meanings. Waste, debris, dirt, and dust are often described as “matter out of place.”<sup>71</sup> But they are also born out of [a] place, usually a mix of raw materials transformed for our use. Nothing can be more human than waste, becoming mountains near us that defy geologic time. San Jacinto Mountain in Riverside County started forming 30 million years ago, for instance. If not here, then where does waste belong?

Instead of continuing my research with the Salton Sea communities, I turned my attention to the growing *Plastic Galaxy* in my studio. Engaging with the communities and developing relationships with the residents takes time and consideration. Rushing to meet my goal felt antithetical to how I wanted to establish relationships with the residents. My crippling worries that defined the last leg of my MFA experience pushed me to turn inward. I sought comfort, a space for forgetting. As I gazed at the towering objects I steadily collected in the last three years at UCSD and San Diego, I imagined putting them in plastic garbage bags to return to their original paths to landfills, recycling, and resource recovery centers. I was throwing plastic containers, kicking plastic cups, and spilling mysterious tree juice while searching for something

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<sup>71</sup>Liboiron, “Waste is not matter out of place,” <https://discardstudies.com/2019/09/09/waste-is-not-matter-out-of-place/#:~:text=Anthropologist%20Mary%20Douglas%20famously%20states,in%20and%20out%20of%20place.>

to start with. And then it dawned on me that the way I was handling these objects, I did not care for them. My behavior was that of a frantic woman searching for a piece of clothing at a sale in a mall. Something that would help escape my mind through retail therapy. Again, I questioned my process and methodologies. What is the purpose of intercepting waste and debris on their way to a transfer station? What do I want to communicate by using these objects as material that were meant to return to 'nature'?

When I am too tired to feel earthly, I am reminded of the exercise my homeopath friend recommended—to imagine my feet growing roots digging into the soil and visualizing the top of my head pointing toward the sky. I wanted to think about verticality, like a tree, deeply grounded and connected with a network of roots and the core line reaching for the sun in the universe. I wanted to imagine this verticality with objects, an assemblage of debris, a totem, a signifier of our entangled existence in the mountain of trash. A symbol for our entangled life with the objects on the precipice of becoming trash that make it possible for us to live, even provide pleasure and comfort.

When I was nine, my father bought a house in Anyang, about an hour train ride from Seoul. I used to go to a Buddhist temple, a short hike up the hills above our house, often for spring water and celebrations. Buddha's birthday celebration was especially memorable for me in spring. It was time to eat delicious and colorful rice cakes made with delicate pinks and yellows, sitting on a wooden floor of a temple surrounded by gently swaying trees. I remember the sound of the trickling water coming down from the mountain into a stone basin and the monks chanting in harmony to a rhythmic tapping of a hollow wooden instrument. And last year, while searching for resources on Korean Shamanism, I found these images of trees deemed sacred adorned with fabric and some with old totems surrounding them. These visuals felt familiar and stirred my



Figure 14: Korean shamanistic ritual totems surrounding a sacred tree with ribbons.<sup>72</sup>

memory, which made me think of my visits to the temple. Of course, I know as an adult that Shamanism and Buddhism are not the same, although I suspect the older tradition of Shamanism influenced elements of Buddhism. But in my memory, the vivid five-colored cloths called (오색천 *Osaekcheon*) and the straw rope that wrapped around a tree trunk are visuals from my childhood intertwined with how I formed ideas about nature, that trees are sacred and they were powerful spirits that offered protections and prosperity. But of course, these memories and images (Figures 14 and 15) are untouched by sun and rain—bleached colors and stains, rotten fruits, and decaying plastic offerings that mark the passing of time.

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<sup>72</sup> <https://shamanism.sgarrigues.net/sacred-trees-and-stone-altars.html>





Figure 15 A & B: Korean five-colored cloths and straw ropes on sacred trees.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, the imagery of a young, naked Korean woman doing a handstand next to a tall tree on a rainy night is embedded in my mind. The compact novel, *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang,<sup>74</sup> is about a woman who rejects the modern Korean norms defined by the generational collective trauma of Japanese colonialism and the Korean and Vietnam wars. The protagonist Yoeng-hye, moved by her recurring bloody nightmares, slowly dreams of her body becoming a tree. Everyone in her life is convinced that she is mad, mentally ill. Yoeng-hye's desire to become a tree was visceral. It felt like she was asking, with her whole body and mind, how did we end up here? Her answer was to starve and train herself to become a tree, realizing that her hands must touch the soil to take deep root, not her feet—the world upside down. The tree

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<sup>73</sup> <https://shamanism.sgarrigues.net/sacred-trees-and-stone-altars.html>

<sup>74</sup> Kang, Han, *The Vegetarian*, 148.

symbolizes life and, in the novel, is a metaphor for an impossible ‘return to nature,’ unless we are willing to respond to our inner madness, to turn our world upside down.



Figure 16: *Jangseung (Totem,) Travel*, 2019. These boxes and plastic containers were stacked precariously. Somehow it never tumbled to the ground.

I have made totemic, sculptural, and vertical forms (Figure 16, 17, 18) by precariously stacking materials such as plastic containers without a solid base, unglued, but never taller than 7 ft. Often, I would find these vertical forms crashed on the floor when I returned to the studio because I had rules like:

- Do not use glue.
- Do not use screws.
- Do not buy anything.
- Do as little intervention as possible.
- Do use available materials. Make do. Use what's available.

Do create less waste.  
Do least harm.

These rules made me look for other ways to bring objects together, often failing, but sometimes it clicked. For instance, braiding has become a part of my methods of assembling different materials like wires, tulle grass, plastic, etc., allowing smaller objects like Raspberry Pi to attach and integrate with the braiding. But I had to think about stability when I wanted *Daughter of Things*<sup>75</sup> (*Waterfall*), one of the two totems, to be a 14 to 16ft tall floor-to-ceiling structure. How was the vertically arranged debris going to be supported? I looked to Janelle Iglesias' *Untitled (stack for San Diego, 2018)*, a 17ft vertical sculpture stacked with repurposed styrofoam coolers and locally sourced materials such as terra cotta pots. Luckily, Janelle shared her process with me. It solved the problem of stable verticality, but I broke most of my rules.

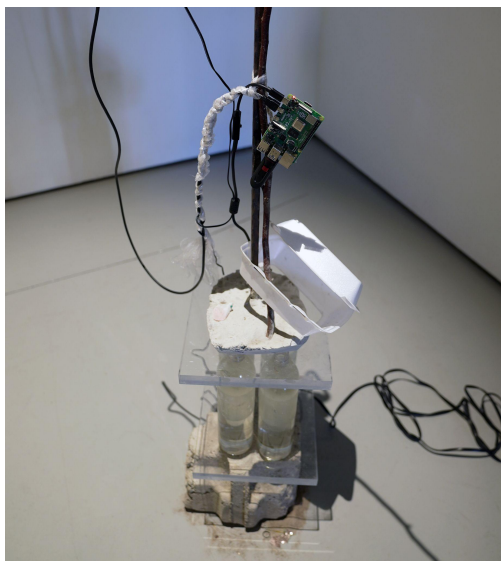


Figure 17: *Concrete, River, Sun, Wind* 2022, 72 x 12 x 48 inches, Detail view, various debris, Raspberry Pi, single-channel video with sound.



Figure 18: *Best wishes (celebrate!)*, 2022, 10 x 5 x 4 ft, Detail view, various debris, Ikea lamp.

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<sup>75</sup> Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector called dust, “a filha das coisas,” meaning “a daughter of things.” In the context of my thesis show, I was thinking autobiographically as well.



I made a secure line attached to the ceiling using ready-made steel pipes with couplings often used for plumbing, purchased at Home Depot. Different lengths of pipes also allowed for modularity, making it possible to adapt to different ceiling heights and giving it the illusion that the sculpture was a part of the interior infrastructure of pipes and vents that run near the ceiling, creating tension when disparate objects joined together. Breaking my rules allowed me to make aesthetic choices that were impossible otherwise. With this strategy, I could stack a plastic bat and an aluminum pot, making it seem like the bat supports it. Moreover, a modified crutch I used when I had a broken foot also added autobiographical moments.



Figure 19 A & B: Janelle Iglesias, *Untitled (stack for San Diego)*, 2ft x 3ft x 17ft  
Courtesy of the Artist.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> reclaimed styrofoam coolers, locally collected terra cotta pots and shards of hand built earthenware, palm tree branches, dried Protea flower, plastic leaves, shells, sunglass lenses, cast fingers, hardware. Installation image of *Being Here with You/Estando aquí contigo*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, downtown, 2018. Photo: Pablo Mason.





Figure 20: *Daughter of Things (Waterfall)*, 2023.

In *Animacies*, Mel Y Chen writes about a couch that comforted them when they were so ill that even their partner's touch couldn't. Another human's touch was too painful on their skin, yet the couch enveloped her in safety and solace. They question the order of things so neatly embedded in our language. They ask, "What is lost when we hold tightly to that exceptionalism

which says that couches are dead and we are alive?"<sup>77</sup> What happens when the distinction between animate and inanimate objects collapses? The objects I chose from the mountain pile of debris, hidden underneath the cascading black plastic, became my couch. I was assembling parts from an overhead projector with a record player. It was mesmerizing when the lens part lined up with the spinning record playing the bird songs. When I sat at a perfect angle, I saw the spinning golden debris with a mini LED blue light reflected on the lens. It felt like I was watching a spinning universe. The anxiety and sadness I felt didn't leave the room. Instead, I made decisions for *Daughter of Things*<sup>78</sup> that hold a precarious balance. The poetic repositions or composites of parts of a whole that embody the assemblage of our daily life entangled with waste and remains.

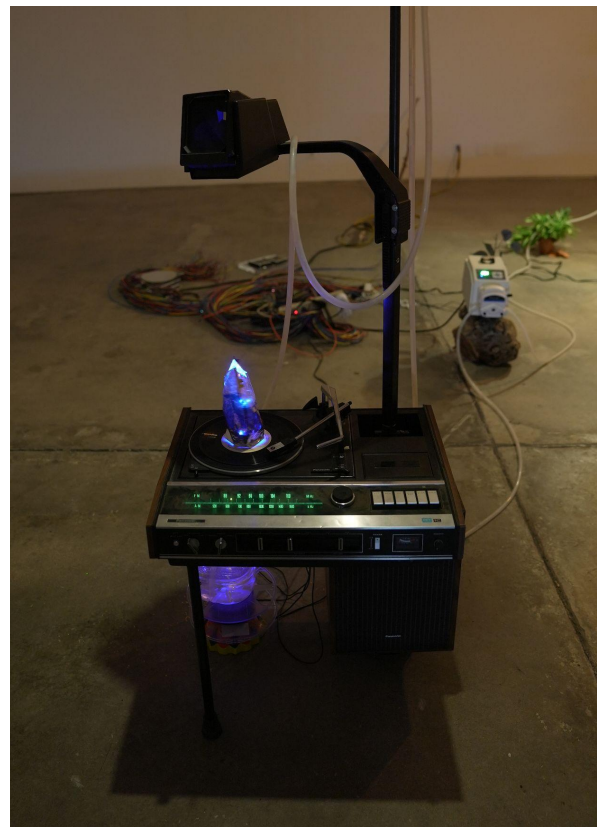


Figure 21 A & B: *Daughter of Things (Birds)*, 2023, Detail.

<sup>77</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, 209.

<sup>78</sup> *Enlivement* by Andreas Weber, a German philosopher - read more. Suggested by Janelle Iglesias.



Figure 22: *Water, Fountain*, 2021, Detail installation view, various debris, single-channel video, sound.

I inherited a Panasonic record player, probably from the 70s, from Anya Gallaccio.<sup>79</sup> I've used it in one of my installations, *Water Fountain* (2021, Figure 22), and Donna Summer's record repeatedly played at a faster speed, adding frenetic energy to otherwise a still room. It was not integral to the installation; it sat outside the main event. But in *Daughter of Things (Birds)*, the modified record player plays a vinyl of bird songs with moving water sounds in the background recorded in the hills of New Hampshire.<sup>80</sup> These sounds were familiar, returning me to my Hudson Valley, NY home. The same type of birds, chickadees, great horned owls, and one of my favorites, wood thrushes, can be heard. Watching the record going a round and a round was

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<sup>79</sup> I couldn't find the exact model online. I realized during the installation that it was important to know for future maintenance the exact model for rare parts for the record player.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Kilham & Alfred L. Hawkes, *The Brook*, Droll Yankees Inc., 1964, D.Y.M 2, 33 R.P.M., Side B.

visceral—reproducing the sound over and over again, as long as a moving body activated it.<sup>81</sup> A portal opened up that touches on a memory of a place. The bird calls reverberated in the gallery as if the space transformed into a forest. But the bird and "nature" sounds were not from San Diego, on Kumeyaay territory. They were *out of place*. They are of a place, but not this specific place. The sounds migrated with me through technology, memorializing a place and the past. But it also makes me wonder if it disconnects us from the place that we inhabit.

A 3/8" steel pipe stabilized the record player by connecting to the speakers underneath the main body, which sat on top of a Korean brown clay pot used for stews. At the tip of the steel pipe, just meeting the light above, was a horse hair ink brush I purchased years ago in Jeonju, Korea. The stew pot bears the weight and the brush point upward toward the light. These assimilated cultural items signified my Koreanness but unrecognizable specificity to someone without a Korean background. The material entanglement reflects the assemblage of myself, both material and immaterial, a daughter of things.

As I was stacking the debris to point upward to the ceiling—*Daughter of Things (Waterfall)*, the record player brought me down to the floor—*Daughter of Things (Birds)*. The peristaltic pump carried water back and forth between the two totems. I used the same pump in *Everything is Dust* (2023), which Dr. Sarah Aarons uses in her Scripps Institution of Oceanography lab. Through this project, I learned the significance of water in forming and carrying dust particles in geologic time, and how the presence of water complicates our understanding of dust as something dry and arid—something dirty to be removed from our homes. This time, the pump was placed in the middle as a mediator powered by electricity, defying gravity. The silicone tubing connects the two totems, and the water in plastic bottles, one

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<sup>81</sup> I also used motion sensor technology for *Water Fountain* installation.

embedded in cement in the base of *Daughter of Things (Waterfall)* and the other, a larger plastic bottle as one of the legs for the record player. I wanted the tubes to move through the debris. A literal depiction of how water becomes with debris and our waste, but also how human engineering and ingenuity make it possible for us to channel water from one place to another, moving up and down, and how vital this movement is for our urban life. It also mirrors the repeatedly looping record player and the fireflies video projection (Figure 13 A), but it is constant. The water travels back and forth from one water bottle to the other.

When you enter the gallery, one light above the record player illuminates the space. It takes a few seconds for your eyes to adjust to the low light. When you approach the totems, the record player starts playing the bird calls, and if you walk around and get closer to *Daughter of Things (Waterfall)*, the lights would turn on, often startling the unsuspected viewer. The readily available motion sensor devices, often used for security and safety, are activated by the viewer's movements. The lights on *Daughter of Things (Waterfall)* and the record player on *Daughter of Things (Birds)* connected to motion sensors turn on for one minute. I wanted the stark difference to bring awareness to our bodies and how the space transforms when it is filled with light and sound, and vice versa, while the steady, rhythmic cadence of the pump is constantly humming. Who is watching whom? Who is waking whom?

jun!yi Min, a second-year MFA performance artist at UCSD, has been doing one performance daily in various San Diego locations. I invited Min to perform, activate, and be activated by the installation. I was curious about how she would respond. I wanted a chance to play a role. I wanted to experience, for the first time, an artist's intentional and deliberate interaction instead of relying on an anonymous viewer engagement. When I heard alishya almeida's poetry at a reading, I felt an immediate kinship with their poeticism about our material



world. Our works run parallel to each other. I was curious how their words could become with my pieces. Would it be too obvious? Will it be too didactic? Is it possible to witness the space between the animate and the inanimate dissolve? Will the chasm between human and non-human beings dissolve? I was interested in this chance encounter and documenting the process.

While I was installing *out of place*, Min and almeida interlaced words and movements and I didn't interject. I was interested in their reading and interpretation of the installation without my directives.<sup>82</sup> They performed, *after 400 years, a machine emerges from taking care of the humans and decides to take care of themself*,<sup>83</sup> on the opening night on Friday, June 9, 2023 at 7:30 pm.



Figure 23: *after 400 years, a machine emerges from taking care of the humans and decides to take care of themself*, Documentation video stills - Video: Wren Gardiner.

<sup>82</sup> Next time, I would like to be more involved in the performance.

<sup>83</sup> alishya almeida's poem for the performance. *after 400 years, a machine emerges from taking care of the humans and decides to take care of themself*

My past installations like, *Water, Fountain* (2021), evoked a stage-like presence, a fictive and dystopic aftermath of an end-of-the-world scenario without the actors' company. This time, the human actors were present. I sat more toward the corner of the gallery watching the performance unfold. almeida, all in black, stood diagonally opposite me across the gallery, and their voice filled the space. Min, in a white sweatshirt with a black pleated skirt, held a round mirror in front of her face while slow and measured movements unfolded in front of our eyes. She chose to enter the installation space from the side of *Daughter of Things (Birds)* instead of facing it, her vision impaired by the mirror. She only removed it from her face at the end of the performance when she placed the mirror at the base of *Daughter of Things (Waterfall)*, like an offering. Her movements also triggered the sensors prompting the bird songs to play and the lights to illuminate the room, revealing the sparkling reflection on the wall following her movements. I read the mirror as a mask, transforming Min into a mythical creature who reflected our humanness back to us.

almeida's reading was also measured, sometimes long pauses between the lines. Although they call it a script, I see it as a poem. I could tell that some of the lines directly responded to the elements of the installation. For instance, these lines:

i recompose myself in another form  
closer to tree soil river oil lithium light  
music metal hope burial birth tenderness

Do you think the birds are listening to us? Who is grace for?<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> An excerpt from almeida's full script/poem: *after 400 years, a machine emerges from taking care of the humans and decides to take care of herself.*

The “i” refers to the two totems made with “recomposed” parts from various objects. When I heard the line, “Do you think the birds are listening to us?” I felt a shift in my consciousness. The line reminded me of the relational imbalance of our language and values that prioritize human existence over non-humans. At times, the lines defined *Daughter of Things* as alive, anthropomorphic figures talking back to us:

maybe, i’m really asking, if i am a garden of extractions

isn’t an extraction alive  
if it came from the living  
and returns to the living,  
as concrete  
as blood  
swimming through a foundation of organs,

The distance between Min and almeida felt like a river dividing them. We had to shift our gaze left and right, back and forth from almeida and Min, disrupting our attentiveness.<sup>85</sup> But my heart felt whole. The performance added another dimension of kinship with the assembled beings. They did not treat the objects around them as a prop to support the meaning they generated. They were in conversation with the “re-composed” and re-positioned non-humans of our universe. This experience was an unequal way to transition to the next phase of my practice.

I cast my net far and wide for my research on waste and waste streams. While migrating back and forth between material and place, I meditated on wastescapes, repositioned assemblages of remains and debris, and myself as a new settler. My research on the Salton Sea, dust, and

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<sup>85</sup> We documented the performance again with a re-formation where a wide view includes the two totems, jun!yi and alishya.



plastic waste helped me understand how we are moving in the circulatory infrastructure of capitalism rooted in colonialism that displaces people and non-humans. I felt the urgency to respond to how we can discard and produce well against the backdrop of the climate crisis. And with each project, art-making felt more like a self-preservation practice than a call to change. It felt impossible to detangle myself when everything from my life was tethered to global unecological extractive practices. And I do mean EVERYTHING, from my mobile phone to organic broccoli in my fridge. Nonetheless, I want to end here on an optimistic note—it will all end well.

I leave you with the entangled materials of the totems:

<i>Daughter of Things (Birds)</i>	<i>Daughter of Things (Waterfall)</i>
2023	2023
cement/1/2" & 3/8" steel pipes/couplings	four wheels/Ikea trash can
black cane/Korean ceramics stew pot	cement/1/2" & 3/8" steel pipes/couplings
plastic bottle/water	plastic bottle/water
saucers/cake mold	wires/tulle grass/wires
silicone tube	silicone tube
Panasonic record player/speakers	pink feather/mini light bulbs
shiny film/mini blue LED lights	laser discs/pot cover/clear tape/square plexi
overhead projector arm	stereo copy arm part lights/bulbs/shiny film shade/hair
Korean horse hair ink brush	Kodak mini HD projector/memory stick
hanging Ikea light/shiny film shade	fireflies video loop/sound
motion sensor	plastic to-go container
	plastic bat/aluminum pot
	crutch
peristaltic pump/wooden stump	motion sensor
wires/bird nest/shiny debris	
square plexi/polaroids	
extension cord/branch	



Figure 24: Front: *Daughter of Things (Birds)* Back: *Daughter of Things (Waterfall)*

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