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In Through the Outdoors: A Case for Rugged Femininity

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In Through the Outdoors: A Case for Rugged Femininity

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Lesley Art and Design

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“For me, climbing is a form of exploration that inspires me to confront my own inner nature within nature. It’s a means of experiencing a state of consciousness where there are no distractions or expectations.”

Lynn Hill

“Art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take risks.”

Mark Rothko

Abstract

Starting from the day we are born, society bombards us with rules, ethics, roles, and stereotypes as socially constructed ideals; however, as children we are not as concerned with these constructs. Children want to feel included and loved, exploring their curiosity about the world through play. Does any of this change as we grow older? A large part of our quest in life revolves around finding comfort and belonging while being part of something bigger than ourselves. Regardless of where we see ourselves within society, our associations and actions create relatable feelings of belonging, connection, and purpose.

In my current installation, I employ retired climbing ropes to explore personal curiosity and experiences. With these materials, I construct various forms and structures that draw on some of our instincts, creating a space where femininity, ruggedness, memory, materiality, risk, and mindfulness coexist. Thereby, I create an experience where time slows down, or maybe even stops for a brief moment, in order to locate and preserve a place of wonder and sublimity.

Primary Purpose

Curiosity is fundamental to us all and can be a driving force behind the many actions of a child. However, for many adults, it seems this inquisitiveness slows as we age. We are all curious, but the intensity of that curiosity can vary greatly for many reasons. Marion Livio, an astrophysicist and author intrigued by human curiosity, researched and wrote a book called *Why: What Makes Us Curious?* We understand that young children are particularly curious and frequently ask questions. According to Livio's research, a child's curiosity is derived from a strong desire to understand cause and effect. Inquisitiveness creates understanding of the world around them so that they may ultimately make fewer mistakes. As adults, we lose some elements of that innocent diversive curiosity, or the ability to be surprised.¹ However our love of knowledge or epistemic curiosity, appears to be generally constant throughout all ages (The 'Why').²

Personally, my curiosity is never quenched. I constantly pursue new learning opportunities and seek places to explore while hunting for a greater understanding of myself, others, and the world I live in. These are among the many reasons why I am an artist, an outdoor sport enthusiast, a traveler, and a "people person." In short, it is why I am who I am. Over the last couple of years, I have come to recognize that curiosity is, and always will be, essential to me. If one is curious, one understands that it takes courage to ask questions, investigate the unknown, and accept failure. Many may opt for a place of comfort and familiarity but for people like

¹ Diversive curiosity is attraction to novelty. It's what encourages us to explore new places, people and things. There is no method or process. This curiosity is just the beginning.

² However, in adults, the intensity can have greater variances due to personality and interest in the subject matter.

myself, who thrive on the challenge of the unexplored, we have a perspective on life far different from those who prefer the view from a couch.

Since my work is about my experiences and curiosity, here I will synthesize the relationships I forge between the sport, mindfulness, materiality, and femininity. First, I will consider sport, mindfulness, and sensation seeking, as well as their connection to the historical and contemporary sublime. Next, I will discuss materiality, converging it with traditions of craft, as well as how I work to reframe these process. Finally, I will consider femininity and how feminism informs my work.

Sensations, Mindfulness, and the Sublime

We are all sensation seekers in some form or fashion. The desired intensity of sensations one seeks varies from person to person. For some they seek a more physical feeling, others a more mental one, or for most of us, a combination of both. Making art and participating in extreme sports, like rock climbing, are interesting to consider in their respective roles in contemporary society. At first, one might not think these two seemingly different practices contain overlapping characteristics, but they do. Even if one is not directly interested in either of these activities, their principles are implicitly woven into our visual and social culture. Artists and athletes alike have always sought the experience of profound emotion, the activation of the senses, and other strong physiological responses.

The aesthetic experience is a key reason for my personal desire of seeking out and making art. It can be characterized as a special relationship between subject and object, in which an object strongly engages the mind, so much so that it overshadows other objects or events (Markovic 2). The term, aesthetic, is also used by rock climbers to describe the nature of a climbing route when one finds it to be pleasurable based on the moves and connection with the

body. When mental engagement is so strong that all other distractions fall away, one begins to enter the realm of meditation. Some find this when engaging with art, and for some others, the creation of art is a mindfulness practice where one actively trains the mind in order to foster awareness and emphasize acceptance. Art allows diverse opportunities for one to focus, be in the moment, and create a space for acknowledgment of feelings and thoughts (Gambis). Yayoi Kusama's infinity mirror rooms are a primary example of artwork that can elicit a mindful state through heightened engagement. Kusama's *Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity* (2009) employs her signature mirrored room with multiple hanging candles that have the appearance of floating while seemingly continuing into infinity (see fig.1). This particular piece allows one to enter alone. Entering by oneself affords a focus and lack of distraction, permitting one to mentally and physically be enveloped by the experience of the room where time seems suspended.



Figure 1: Shana Martin in Yayoi Kusama's *Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity*, 2016

What interests me about Kusama's work is the structure of the infinity effect created by the mirrors inside an enclosed space. This encompassing aesthetic experience plays heavily on the senses. Having experienced this work myself, I can honestly say the effects of the room are so powerful that they elicit a physical, mental, and emotional response.

As early as 1934, John Dewey promoted the connection between aesthetics and understanding the world, where the bodily relationship with the surrounding environment molded the basis for the aesthetic experience. Contemporary studies continue this trend in understanding the relationship between the aesthetic as well as our comprehension and processing of external phenomena. The only way of perceiving the world is through our senses; thus, one's experiences are always aesthetic in nature (Tofler).

For example, Matthew Barney has successfully folded the physical experience of sport into his art practice. In an interview referring to his ongoing *Drawing Restraint* project (see fig. 2), Barney explained: "As an athlete, you understand that your body requires resistance in order to grow. It's something we take for granted." (Artist Football) This work is a series of studio experiments, drawing upon an athletic model of development in which growth occurs only through restraint. The muscle encounters resistance, becomes engorged, is broken down, and then in healing becomes stronger. Though Barney focuses on the corporeal dimension and does not directly say it, he demonstrates the understanding that this applies to the mind and to mental as well as physical growth. Anyone who has done any sort of focused training generally understand that these spheres and growth through resistance are intertwined. For better or for worse, the physical body and the mind are forever linked in a harmonious system (Artist Football).



Figure 2: Matthew Barney, *Drawing Restraint*, 1988

In contrast, my work is not a direct reflection of physical restraint, but of the process. The choices of how I manipulate the material are underpinned by a similar notion of physically tearing down and building up forms and structures. These processes of resistance involve pulling and pushing, hanging and attaching, tightening and knotting. The underlying metaphor of resistance and the growth that comes from pushing through it is something I am no stranger to. From the physical resistance of training, to art making, to resisting social constructs, challenge permeates my life.

Many researchers are beginning to discover that most sensation seekers are looking for clarity in moments of stress and confusion. The depth to which this is internalized is on par with that of meditation (Minné). Practice, training, and overlearning skills to solidify muscle memory and safety are crucial no matter the form of extreme sport. If conditions are not right or one does not feel they have practiced enough of the necessary skills, most will turn away from pushing their limits. In rock climbing, it often takes time and repetition to puzzle through a sequence of movements in order to complete a climb. A key component of this process is focus and mindfulness, or the quieting of the mind. A free climber, one who climbs without ropes, explained it's such a hyper-focused and, at the same time, calming experience (Tofler 2).

Like some extreme sport athletes, endurance artist Marina Abramović understands and often employs an extreme version of this relationship to danger and mindfulness in her art. In a 2016 interview she explains the significance of danger within her work:

Danger is important because it brings time to the point of the here and now, to the present. Your mind escapes every single second. Every time we blink there is another thought. So, to stop time, to just be in the present, you have to be in an extreme, dangerous situation. That's why I stage situations where I have to do some dangerous things—so that the public and I are in the space at the same time. For *The House with The Ocean View* (2002) it was very difficult to be in the present constantly for twelve days, so I always tried to stand on the edge, over the ladder with knives, where I might fall on the knives. That was the point. Even if I lost consciousness or was too dizzy because I didn't eat, or just physically weak, for me that moment was the right point to stand there, because that was the point at which I could be in the here and now, in the present (Artspace).

This explains being present in the moment and how actions help her, as well as the viewers, meet in a completely connected space. This awareness of being in the now is arguably a form of mediation and mindfulness practice and also converges with the philosophy of the sublime, especially as elaborated by Burke.



Figure 3: Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Rest Energy*, 1980

For Burke, the sublime is a perception of, and heightened awareness in, the world. Burke, an empiricist holding that our knowledge of the natural world comes from our sensory experiences and perceptions, believed that our strongest passion is grounded in terror. He asserts that pain is much more powerful than pleasure; this amplified state of being is where sensibility is driven out by “an irresistible force” and “the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain another.” Obscurity, or so Burke calls it, is even more amplified when accompanied by a sense of the unknown (Burke 74).



Figure 4: Shana Martin leading *S Wall*, 2017

For a rock climber, this seems all too familiar. Your mind and body are under physical duress. You are a speck on a monumental rock in the middle of nowhere, trying to find your way up a mountain with little to go on but your instincts. If you are lucky, your research has afforded you topographical maps and a description of your journey. Not knowing what obstacles may lay ahead or if the preparation and research will get one through the climb and back down the mountain, the choice is made to engage in the thrill of risk, pain, and apprehension over and over again. Here, sensation seeking, the sublime, and mindfulness all intermingle in that particular space. This cohesion of engagement, feelings, and perceptions is also the basis for my motivations as both an artist and extreme athlete.

Given this understanding of sensation, the sublime, and mindfulness, it became clear that representing landscape in some pictorial way was inadequate. Instead, I moved into creating

environments. In my current practice, I work in a space of sensation and mindfulness to engage the viewer in navigating a parallel emotional space that I experience as a climber. Being in the present and connecting with the sensations of the body are essential to my process of creating. However, some of my previous work of photo-transfers and sculpted photography fell short of this goal (see fig 5 and 6).

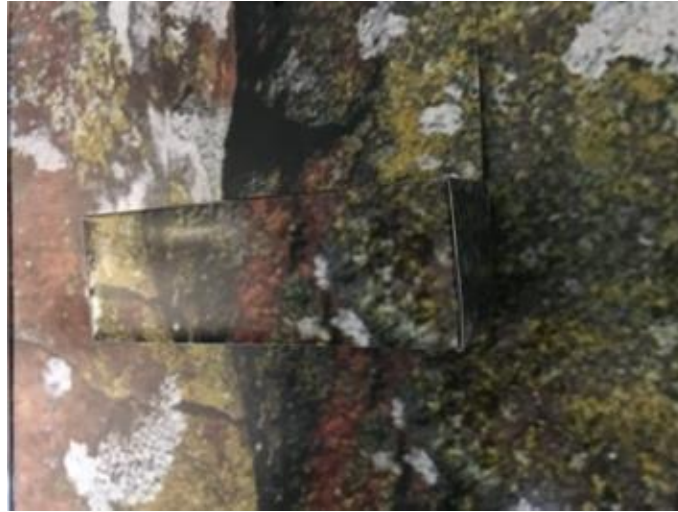


Figure 5: Shana Martin, *Commercialization*, 2017



Figure 6: Shana Martin, *Unplugged*, 2018

Working to connect with these desires, I began investigating how I could construct art on a larger scale, making several iterations of paper and photo maquettes as possible studies for large sculptures or installations (see fig 7 and 8).



Figure 7: Shana Martin, *Untitled* (sculptural photo boxes), 2018

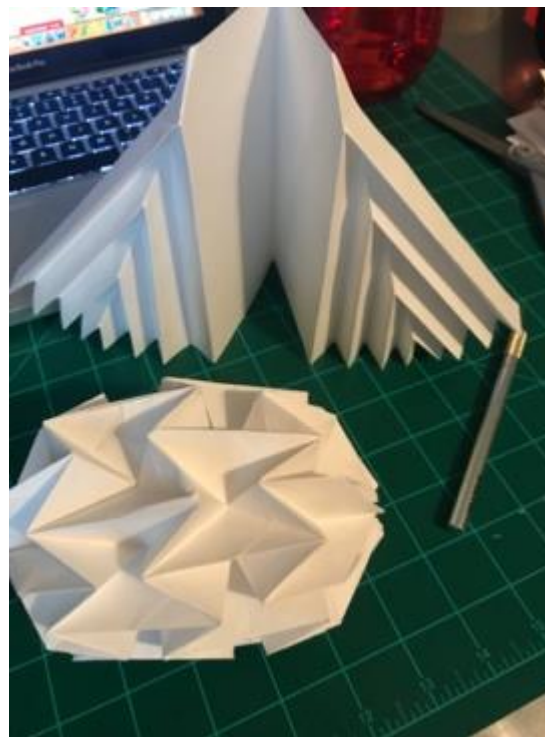


Figure 8: Shana Martin, sculptural maquettes, 2018

Through this process of exploration, I also began to discover that representation in photography was not catalyzing the discourse I wanted to develop around my ideas. After researching photography and its historical position in art, I decided to begin abstracting my work instead of just manipulating images. Much in the same way Letha Wilson uses photography, I began using cropped images to abstract the photos down to textures (see fig 9).



Figure 9: Letha Wilson, Dark Tando, 2016

I then began printing these fragments of photographs on paper and using them to create larger forms for installation. Although I felt some of the structures and ideas in my practice were interesting, I concluded that it still was not generating the discussions or the physical engagement I wanted in my practice, nor was I constructing anything that would connect to and physically engage with the viewer as a participant. With a strong desire to create a work that encouraged more viewer engagement, I researched materiality.



Figure 10: Shana Martin, *The Spaces Between*, 2019



Figure 11: Shana Martin, *maquette*, 2019

Material Matters and Feminine Features

My current material choices developed out of various stages of research and self-exploration. And much like physical training for sport, my art practice and studies have informed

my instincts as an artist. Climbing rope has long been a material that I felt would translate well into artmaking. However, I never permitted myself to explore it. Understanding that I require the physical engagement of making art coupled with the fact that my ideas and aesthetics are pulled from memory further supported the use of retired climbing ropes as a material. The first iteration of the rope work had 6 hang points with a half square knot sinnet at the top of each. A sinnet is what you might think of as a chain and the half square knot makes the double helix style knot. The cords were then hand-crocheted together on site. Each end had its own treatment, some were coiled, some daisy-chained (which is also crochet), or some were just left in a pile, and others were thoughtfully laid out. The metaphor behind the form was that the top, or knots, represented my experiences that made me who I am. They come together and converge in a funnel form, then spread out to represent all the various aspects of my current life and personality (see fig. 12 and 13).



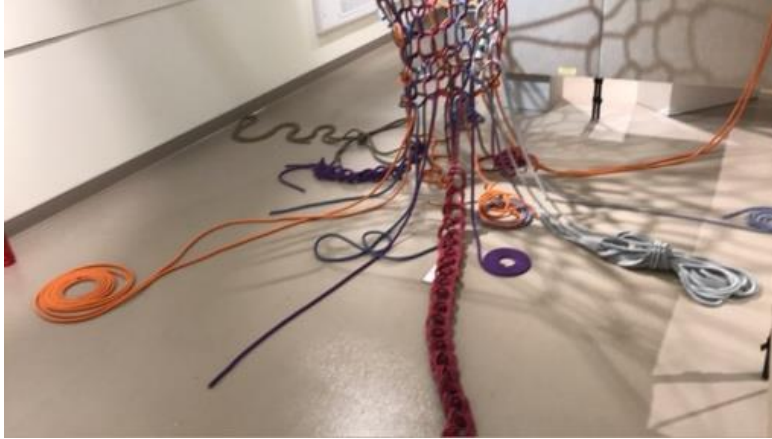


Figure 12 and 13: Shana Martin, *Untitled*, 2019

Though this work was met with much interest, it was not creating the dialogue that I intended. While I wanted people to engage with the work, many wanted to climb or hang on it instead. Although this type of participation was entertaining to watch, it absolutely was not my intent. As a result, I wondered if the structure was more architectural in design it might elicit more of the reaction I hoped for. My admiration for religious structures as well as the influences of landscape, became a starting point for this installation (see fig. 14 and 15). This iteration was also met with some positive commentary on the draping and knotting of the rope, but many wanted to see more. What “more” meant was explained in critiques as more places for repetition of shape or more height. Further dialogue revolved around changing the structure’s composition to be more asymmetrical and adding moments of analog version of “glitch”. Understanding the validity and enormous potential of these suggestions, I went back to the drawing board and dove further into how to synthesize my ideas and material.



Figure 14 and 15: Shana Martin, *Untitled*, 2020

Although my forms may allude to features like architectural or organic structures, the places where imperfection, gravity, and happenstance arise is of equal interest to me. I felt there was promise in this line of thinking. Robert Morris's words perfectly described this process:

Sometimes a direct manipulation of a given material without the use of any tool is made. In these cases, considerations of

gravity become as important as those of space. The focus on matter and gravity as means results and forms that were not projected in advance. Considerations of ordering are necessarily casual and imprecise and unemphasized. Random piling, loose stacking, hanging, give passing form to the material. Chance is excepted and indeterminacy is implied, as replacing will result in another configuration. Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion. It is part of the work's refusal to continue estheticizing the form by dealing with it as a prescribed end (Morris 46).

Seeking to embody this approach, I then looked to folk-art traditions, craft, and macramé as uninhibited reflections of my personal experiences from childhood and of my relationship to my own femininity. Learning knots and fiber crafts has been a theme throughout my life. At home, as a child, I was taught how to make macramé-style friendship bracelets and learned to cross-stitch. At summer camp, I learned how to tie various knots for saddling and taking care of horses, as well as macramé to create lanyards with plastic lacing. As an adult, I had to learn numerous knots for rock climbing and even picked up crocheting for a short period of time after becoming a high school art teacher. So, to employ knots in my work was second nature.

Historically, the discrepancy between craft and fine art was defined by the material as well as the intentions behind the work. The fine arts hierarchy was derived from the European academic traditions, which were based on aesthetics and taste, as well as the ostensible amount of creativity and imagination required for the genre. Additionally, the word "fine" did not

reference the quality of the work but the purity of the discipline within a professional occupation that was steeped in education. Craft, on the other hand, was defined as a decorative, applied, or domestic art traditionally learned in the home and, as a result, was given a status well below any of the fine arts. The door to bridging the gap between craft and fine art was initially opened by the Arts and Crafts Movement in the nineteenth century when artists and craftsmen rebelled against the impersonal and mechanical influences created by the Industrial Revolution. Seeking to regain a connection, as well as social and economic reform, practitioners of the movement believed that the relationship forged between the artist and handcrafting was the key to producing human fulfillment.

Furthermore, twentieth century avant-garde movements like Dadaism, Surrealism, and Russian Constructivism believed that bringing an end to the distinction between fine and applied arts would create an art that was more relevant to the people, and therefore by default, art would become more robust and meaningful (Parker 190). On the heels of World War II, the Minimalist artists like Donald Judd and Richard Serra also explored the role of industrial materials and processes in contemporary art. These twentieth century methodologies began to alter the longtime stagnant canon of fine arts and directed the turn towards dematerializing the traditional art object while galvanizing the ideas latent within the material relationships it produced (Burisch).

Post-Minimalist art emerged as artists like Eva Hesse became unwilling to bend to the monochromatic, architectural, austere work of the time. To cut into Minimalism's stern atmosphere, Hesse developed a self-mocking stance, applying general levity. Viewed at the time as a kind of "Oldenburg number", this attitude was conveyed through the employment of highly colored and emotionally saturated forms. Limp, pliable, and cheap materials were embraced.

Moreover, such limpness was held together with sewing, lacing, and grommeting, with rags, vinyl, and discarded objects, which became the primary materials of choice (Pincus-Witten). Hesse's *Right After* (1969-70) work was completely handmade, slack, drooping, dipped in latex rope, dangling from the ceiling and was in stark contrast to the sleek Minimalist pieces of the time (see fig 16).



Figure 16: Eva Hesse, *Right After* 1969-70

In much the same way, I feel my work contrasts with many contemporary production methods. Working to push against the prevalence of certain contemporary materials, like digital media, I aim to bring back the physical nature of the object and the tactile qualities of making. Our present multimedia and technology-driven world has vast amounts of information at its fingertips through internet access, social media, crowd sourcing, videos, and smartphones. Websites like Pinterest and Etsy cultivate a new culture of DIYers, and as the popularity of such sites grow, so does the desire for the handmade object. These crafted, handmade, small-batch goods “made with love” are now being brought to the forefront of our culture. This, by default, embeds deep meaning about the current culture into the work of any contemporary art practice that utilizes craft or draws from its traditions (Relyea 58). Furthermore, if the feminist

movement of the 60s made great strides in women's rights, there are still inequalities and sexism woven into everyday language, society, and institutions (Drucker 13). This is part of the reason why traditional craft processes such as macramé, weaving, embroidery, and crochet continue to be utilized in contemporary art practice. These techniques and methods carry a deep history that represents feminism and the feminine in contemporary art (Craft Process).

The climbing rope I use is innately heavy and tactile in nature and perfectly reflects many of these ideas. Moreover, much like Duchamp's Readymades, all my materials have lived former lives and are now being repurposed to evoke the past yet connect us to the present through each installation.

When I began climbing, about eighteen years ago, it was very much a "boys club." I was often the only woman in a group of trad climbers.³ This never bothered me since I have spent my whole life as a tom-boy, in the dirt, unlike most who identify as female. I think I have always felt comfortable around athletes because my "lack of femininity" was not noticed and even seen as a positive attribute in such circles. However, women are now making a name for themselves or are just now truly being recognized as a force in extreme sport. And in climbing, some women have defiantly forged a path to help open such aspirations for others. Lynn Hill was the first person, male or female, to free climb The Nose on the famous El Capitan wall in Yosemite Valley in 1993 (see figure 17). At that time, this was a feat that many thought was not possible, especially for a woman. The social constructs of our world still depict it in binary terms, and I do not recognize that binary definition in sports, or art, and continue to push against the resistance that women and those who are female identified are not equal in their own right.

³ Trad is short for traditional, meaning you set your own gear into the rocks or use natural elements for protection.



Figure 17: Lynn Hill climbing The Nose on El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, 1993

The progress of 60s conceptual art helped bridge the gap that had long left female artists out of the museums and galleries. The first public exhibition of Feminist Art and also the beginning of the California Institute of the Arts' Feminist Program, was by Womanhouse. Founded by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in January of 1972, this effort took place in an abandoned mansion turned into an all-female art installation and performance space. There, Chicago and Schapiro encouraged their students to build an environment where women's conventional roles could be presented, exaggerated, and subverted. (PennState)

This exhibition showcased an artwork by Faith Wilding that has been influential in my own art practice. *Crocheted Environment* was originally constructed in 1972 and then reconstructed for the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston in 1995 (see fig. 18 and 19). Also referred to as the "womb room," Wilding's work was a room painted black with a single enveloping structure built of crocheted yarn and a long light hanging from the center. The structure is substantial yet, soft. There are spaces of openness and density. Viewers can stand or sit within, suggesting contradictory sensations of security, entrapment, serenity, and danger. Wilding explains: "Our female ancestors first build themselves and their families round-shaped shelters. These were

protective environments, often woven out of grasses, branches, or weeds. I think of my environment as linked in form and feeling with those primitive womb-shelters, but with the added freedom of not being functional.” (Crocheted)



Figure 18 and 19: Faith Wilding, *Crocheted Environment*, 1972 and 1995

In my practice, I explore the sublime through abstraction and obscurity, working to create an incongruity in the sensations by creating structures from soft ropes and macramé knots out of a masculine outdoor material. This incongruity thus pushes against stereotypes of femininity associated with softer materials, creating an understanding that a more rugged look can be just as feminine as an aesthetic. Moreover, representing “feminine” does not imply weakness.



Figure 20: Shana Martin, detail image of knots, 2020

Orly Genger, who also works with rope, exemplifies these types of ideals. In an artist talk for Artnet.com, Genger mentions how people will often comment on how little she is and how substantial the ropes are. She also describes the painstaking process of cleaning the retired ropes she gets from fishermen, despite having a team to help. In both instances, she seems proud of the fact that she subverts these stereotypes of what a woman can achieve (Artist Talk).



Figure 21: Orly Genger, installing *Red, Yellow and Blue* in Madison Square Park, 2013

There are other examples. For instance, in the way that Sheila Pepe feminizes high modernism with craft and uses utilitarian materials inflected with evocations of domesticity, I too, seek to

highlight craft's broader context and history. Since craft and macramé are associated with the feminine and the domestic connotations that underpin craft's marginalized status in the art canon these attributes also make them ideal feminist tools for critiquing male-dominated modernist values (Abrams). This relationship and critique are reflected in Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* and in Pepe's sprawling installations, whose less refined, chaotic compositions register the complexities of contemporary life.



Figure 22: Sheila Pepe, *Mind the Gap*, 2005

As an addition to these influences, what interests me in the work of Sheila Hicks is her use of color and texture. Refusing to stay within the limits of traditional weaving, Hicks works in surprising textile elements in almost all her output. By exploring the texture of fibers and her use of repetition, one can't help but see resemblances to roots, branches, water, boulders, and other elements of landscape. The contrasting textures Hicks creates are further enriched by the juxtaposition of bold color harmonies. Never limited by color palette, she often alters color choices from one work to the next, from complimentary, to analogous colors, to double split complementary, and so on. These complicated color choices resemble a quilt created in nature. Much in the way that a handful of rocks scooped up from the ground might have its own unique

textures and colors, so do Hicks' pieces, no matter if they are part of an installation or are individual works.



Figure 23: Sheila Hicks, *Migdalar* installation, 2019

Sheila Hicks and Sheila Pepe's work has profoundly influenced my practice over the past months. Hicks' employment of color and texture has encouraged me to investigate my own thoughts on color and color theory as well as how these ideas coincide within my interlacing of the domestic craft and ruggedness through heftier repurposed outdoor materials. Thinking about quilts and the quilting process is therefore ideal within this trajectory. The mixing and matching of patches of color and texture can be seen as a contrast of the domestic to the outdoor environment while also remaining open to interpretation. However, in contrast to Hicks' influence on me in terms of color, Pepe's work has indirectly informed how I produce structures and spaces for navigation. This type of space not only creates a relevant feminist metaphor but also requires mindful and alert participation akin to climbing.



Figure 24, 25, and 26: Shana Martin, *Untitled*, 2020

Continuing the Path

I began this exploration of sensation, the sublime, femininity, and materiality in a far different place than my current practice. Throughout the process, I grappled with digital and photographic media, and with what I ultimately wanted to create a dialogue around. Discovering a balance between conversation and materials led to abstraction and materiality becoming fundamental to my practice. This curiosity leads me to pursue art and rock climbing as parallel and related pursuits. This investigation nurtured my mind as well as cultivated an effective use of materials and process in my art making. For me, growing as an artist means developing as a human being, relating to others, linking mind and body, connecting my worlds and myself to something larger. Fostering this internal sense of wonder through adventure, discovery, and the outdoors is key. To intertwine my introductory quotes by Lynn Hill and Marc Rothko would ideally express all that I am as a person and would go something like this: For me, art and adventure is a constant exploration into the undiscovered as well as the experienced world, which fosters a state of consciousness and self-discovery experienced only by those willing to take risks. Today, I continue to intertwine material and adventure to forge a trail for rugged femininity.

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