

Research in practice

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Kesia Tucker -2305081

AI acknowledgement-

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As Within, So Without

It is a lot easier to assemble words on a page than it is to actually practise what we preach, but it is the practice in the end that helps us to dig deep and bring something meaningful outside of ourselves, where it can grow and thrive in the light of day. This title was chosen for its notion of witchery whilst also being true to the nature of this essay, digging deep within our artistic practices to give life to our art for all to see and connect with, be inspired by, question, beauty or the outright hideous and grotesque depiction of things, this feeling can be rather daunting at times but so necessary for growth.

My chosen keywords, sculpted while thinking what my practice represents to me, focusing on key areas for instance, what tools, mediums used to create, why a need to create and why nature is a collaborator. I have found the more I research I see that everything is connected, even man-made things originate from a natural source. When I swim in the seas and rivers, I wonder about how this body of water reaches to the other side of the world and so in turn do I, I become part of that energy flow if only for a little while. It is the interconnectedness and entanglement of the world that really fascinates me, the acting and reacting, the wear of time, our place in it, my place in it.

The first keyword 'Empowerment', defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2019) as "the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you". At one time or another we have all felt lost, unsure, anxious or scared. These are considered negative feelings but overall, they are feelings to overcome and by overcoming them we feel empowered, strong and enlightened. This is a feeling I try to express through my work similar to the artist Kiki Smith, famed for her more than 40-year career based on a mixed media practice, exploring feelings of spirituality and feminist (wild women) archetypes. In Marina Warner's book *Enchanted Forms* (2018) while talking about Smith's work '*Self-portrait as a beast in Eden*' Warner states, "if a questing heroine does a kindness to a tree, a stream, a stone or a cow, a bird or a wolf. Logic of fairy tale means that she will find them at her side when she is in need" (Warner, 2018, p60). I feel that this in its own form has

messages of acts of kindness being repaid with kindness, I believe there is strength in being kind even when people are not deserving and being true to one's own feelings. Kiki Smith I feel is very empowering as she is confident in who she is, and with that comes great freedom to express creatively in whatever way she chooses to explore. Her work is rich in metamorphic imagination and renewal. Warner implies that Smith "has not adopted one God or creed; instead she roams through them hungrily" (Warner,2018,p61). Connecting with this statement on all levels I also feel a lack of a Deity or God, but I search greedily for their stories of strength and surreal ethnicities to get lost in, finding a balance between escapism and reality can be a challenge at times. Smith's bronze and wood sculpture 'Pyre Woman Kneeling' (2002), draws my attention for a similar vision of a burning willow figure I hope to create.



Fig 1

I find this really moving and comforting knowing that others have their own expression of this celebratory memorial to all women, put to death for being magical, wild and feared. Men of this time seemed to find these women both threatening and alluring, at its roots people feared the knowledge of healers and thinkers and the freedom they gain. There is power in setting ourselves alite, in lighting

the match ourselves, sparking thoughts of renewal and letting go of things that do not honour us. I find great feminine pleasure in doing things I would have been burned for 400 years ago.

I have often found I have felt less than or lacking something, when compared to our male counterparts in different scenarios, normally related to strength or emotion and working within the landscape. I have found myself driven by an angry feeling of being underestimated because I am a dyslexic woman and close to nature. In the eco-feminist movement this kind of relationship and connection is explored more deeply between humans and nature, furthering my own understanding.

Thinker James Bridle in his book *Ways Of Being* (2022) coming from a more scientific view point mentions "The more than human world coined by David Abraham" (Bridle,2022) this was stated in 1996 which also happens to be my birth year, reminding the world that the things we deem less intelligent might in fact have a higher place in our ecological world. This term challenges the human view, it emphasises the complexity and interwoven ecological worlds from plants, animals, ecosystems and so much more. Its perspectives like these that challenge notions of superior humans and shift focus from exploitation to collaboration. He also talks of walking plants and tree migrations which I find truly magical to have scientific knowledge backing such a whimsical idea, Bridle also states,

We think we are studying the world but in reality we are really making evident the limits of our own thinking, which are embodied in our log books and measuring instruments. The truth is always stranger, more lively, more expansive than anything we can compute.

(Bridle, 2022).

This I find truly thought provoking and gives me a sense of wanting to embrace the chaos and see where it takes me, images of jumping into a river deep in the woods comes to mind. The feeling of being on the right path and free in the fact that you can play, learn and grow and do not need to have all the correct answers or questions to do so, is truly an empowering feeling.

My second chosen keyword is 'Natural Resources', this defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2019) as "things such as minerals, forests, coal, etc. that exist in a place and can be used by people". Chosen for a love of learning about the natural world and gathered materials used to create, from willows to weave and alchemies to explore such as natural inks, dyes and wild clays, giving a sense of collaboration. Creating intriguing questions such as, where does the line between natural and man-made materials arise and provoke thoughts of how one can live low impact lives and closer to nature. I enjoy the wanderlust of searching for old fragments of things that cannot be explained, man-made objects such as ceramics that nature has worn down as a pebble leaving an air of mystery to them. From Victorian bottle dumps to rivers rich in crystals and fragmented ceramics, to learning new plants and what they might be used for, the ritual feeling of gathering from the earth to express myself is an immense and immersive part of my practice fuelling a drive to create.



Fig 2.

Artist Laura Ellen Bacon stated,

I gave this work the title of *Le Sentiment Demeure* (The Feeling Remains) because I myself feel that when you create something in a place with your hands, you leave a piece of yourself there; the thoughts and dreams you have while making the work seem to invisibly weave themselves into the work and somehow they remain... (Bacon, 2022).



Fig 3.

It is hard to imagine much else when looking at Bacon's work than the interwoven entanglement of matter to create form. Her forms make me think of life, flow, movement and energy like those in Studio Ghibli films, nature ready to fight back. The old architectural spaces she seems to have a fondness of exhibiting in, contrasts her work amazingly well and the simplicity between the architecture and her willow forms are so pleasing to behold. I find mirrored feelings about woven works, that take time, so you are creating in a place for a while interacting with its energy. Olivia Laing stated in her book *Gardens against time* (2024) "What would it mean to make gardens that are inclusive, shared, and restorative spaces—a cherished commonwealth for all?" (Laing, 2024). Imagine being able to share woven gardens that connect to different emotions becoming a place of expression

and wonder, would others feel the same or feel something different entirely when taking in such a place? Working with natural materials outside you are reminded to follow nature's pace, slow down and see what you miss when your world is full of check lists, Laing also states this perfectly "The garden is a time capsule as well as a portal out of time—a space that reminds us of the need for slower, ecological rhythms" (Laing, 2024). This symbiosis of natural art and outside space is so symbolic of the future steps we should be taking, walking out of a park on a sunny afternoon, I overheard a woman say to her child 'Not disrupting the peace of the land but flowing with it' it made my heart squeeze to hear such a statement and I wonder what inquisitive question the child might have asked to receive such a response. This inquisitive nature needs nurturing in our children. These lines of questioning leads me to think of how our ancestor's created art in the form of land structures such as Stonehenge or Glastonbury and its astrological star signs etched into the earth all around the Tor or places of ritual, the difference between land art that decays and leaves no traces and the stone structures that stand millennia, the Latin phrase *Memento Mori* comes to mind, meaning you will decay in time.



Fig 4.

The final keyword is 'Interwoven', defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2025) as "to twist together or combine two or more things so that they cannot be separated easily". There is a spell that is cast with the use of this word for me, implying magic, weaving of materials, fusions of the elements -earth, fire, wind, water and spirit- and how these things can be communicated in a visual language. When I feel particularly creative it is like unlocking or tapping into an energy, it is like a spark or an ember, a need or something I just cannot contain, like a way of life. I feel many of my fellow creators and thinkers may feel it too but call it something different, perhaps it is a universal feeling just brought forth in different ways across land and time, and it is the sum of our parts that make us whole.

When you start seeing and learning about the interwoven connections, how one thing cannot be without the other it is hard to look away. My mind wonders on such matters particularly when weaving with willow, listening to audiobooks, podcasts or music such as, *Entangled life* (2020), *Women Who Run With Wolves* (1997), *Great Women Artists* (2015), Agnes Obel, to listening about great thinkers such as Darwin and his eyes seeing the same things I see but spoken in a different time.

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. – Darwin (*Origin of Species Variorum*, 1872)

I find myself less driven to possess all the answers but prefer to wonder and collect feelings, knowledge in a visual way. Sometimes it is hard to believe how wonderful, magical and mysterious this home of ours truly is, I believe our world is made up of energy, moving between substance and matter forever shifting and being borrowed.



Fig 4

Leonora Carrington selected for her beautiful, ethereal Surrealism, sometimes using mundane things such as cooking implements to highlight the ritual everyday necessities of health and wisdom. I also found it significant the limited amount of her work available, perhaps as a result of the predominantly male Surrealist movement she belonged to, but more information on her work is coming to light. Carrington famously said "I've always had access to other worlds. We all do because we dream. There are things that are not sayable. That's why we have art." (Leonora Carrington: The Lost Surrealist. 2024). I really understand the place Carrington spoke of, as dreaming is such a big part of life "over a lifetime, a person might dream for up to 6 years" (Mogridge, p.52 2022) and can be an amazing, crazy, safe space for having other worldly experiences and room to build with expression and intuitiveness. Another Surrealist painter of this time was Ethel Colquhoun featured in the book *Radical Landscapes*

(2022) in the section “the earth is a women and she will rise” features her painting “Attributes of the moon (1947) is a rare depiction of an anthropomorphic goddess figure, part Mary, part mermaid, part sea serpent, engulfed in a vulvic cave” (Pih, p. 112, 2022), this screams interwoven masterpiece to me.



Fig 5.

It is hard to know the true source of a feeling, searching for a way to understand it and even harder to express in a way that you know you will still be judged by the outcome, but in the end its only really your own opinion that matters, allowing the viewer to see through your eyes and see your creative illusions. Reminding me of a statement made by Sarah Clegg in *Women's lore* (2023).

If you'll be painted as a monster no matter what, you might as well make your own choices, and take control of your own destiny, rather than attempting to mould yourself to a contradictory ideal of womanhood that can be taken away no matter what you do. As symbols of 'unacceptable' women, Lilith and our demons are symbols of us all.

(Clegg,2023)

I am women after all and I feel this is truly important to me, it is a ritualistic feeling, having a way of life and practice that is dear, my intuitive nature and emotional values, make me passionate and rich in so many ways. Images of burning willow with its sweet, scented smoke, making charcoal or pigments from the ashes.

Empowerment, Natural Resources and Interwoven, my three keywords, all support different elements of my practice from fighting fear, material matters and learning how to live side by side with nature, interwoven worlds and connections of spirituality and storytelling. To weave things together and give it life, your life, love and magic. Everything blends to create eco-systems or micro-climates and that is precisely how I feel about my practice, I want it to move with the land and wash over you like the sea and create its own space to exist.

The research on my three keywords has led me to a potential research question for further analysis, 'how does eco-feminism connect with the use of natural materials and a sense of magic to promote empowerment?' To perhaps encourage an "ancient search for happiness, freedom and paradise."

(Hans Ulrich Obrist, p139, 2014)

To finish on some wise and powerful words, Lord Byron once wrote

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,

There is a rapture on the lonely shore,

There is society where none intrudes,

By the deep Sea, and music in its roar: I love not Man the less, but Nature more.

(Lord Byron, 1815)

Somehow speaking to the inner parts of my soul every time I read it, ringing true to this day for so many people.

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