

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2022

In the Landscape of her Life

Susan M. Sinitiere

The University Of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Sinitiere, Susan M., "In the Landscape of her Life" (2022). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 11958.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11958>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

In the Landscape of her Life

By

Susan Sinitiere

Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Louisiana at Lafayette,
Lafayette, LA, 2017

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of
Master of Fines Arts
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT
May 2022

Committee Members:

Professor, Trey Hill, Chair
Fine Arts

Professor Cathryn Mallory
Fine Arts

Professor Julia Galloway
Fine Arts

Professor Hipolito Rafael Chaçon
Art History and Criticism

In the Landscape of Her Life

“You may chisel a boy into shape, as you would a rock, or hammer him into it, if he be of better kind, as you would a piece of bronze. But you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does.”

-John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 1865

Table of Contents

Artist's Statement.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Studio Practice.....	3
Exhibition.....	5
<i>Faded Blushes</i>	5
<i>Dishwater Blues</i>	9
<i>Our Birds Eat the Ones I Leave Behind</i>	13
<i>I Can't Unsee You</i>	16
<i>Scarlet Fire</i>	18
Conclusion.....	23
Image List.....	24
Bibliography.....	25

Artist's Statement

Having spent most of my life as a homemaker, I make work that weaves together memories, private affinities, and perceptions of circumstance revealed in the embellishments and structures of a homestead. The sentiment of a favored chair or dutifully planted garden become opportune vignettes of reflection revealing expectations, experience, and outcomes ever evolving through the seasons of life.

The inference of domestic spaces as metaphor for transitional life passages has become a central theme of my mixed media practice. Examination of botanical growth in seasonal patterns is a learning process, reminiscent of a kindergarten where I explore the perceptions of the feminine role in a domestic setting and where perception is supplanted by real experience. A wilted flower, once a bud and then a bloom, is no less beautiful or necessary, as it drops seeds for spring emergence.

Introduction

Home is no less defined as a dutifully arranged environment as it is a place where memories are founded, relationships first evolve, and sentiments find attachment. Having spent more than 20 years as a mother of five, creating a home where my children were able to find nurtured guidance through every stage of growing pains was once foremost in that chosen domestic role. Recreating a domestic space where still reflection of the passage of time in one's life beyond childhood felt essential as an artist pondering a lineage of feminine idealizations. Now that my children are grown, the house sold, and the garden gone to weeds; there is no more opportunity to craft an ideal home to safeguard innocent minds. This exhibition is, instead, a rendering of domestic spaces that acknowledges an experiential transition from youthful ideals to matured realities, from my feminine perspective; at times, melancholic and at times, exuberant in sentiment. Foremost is a visual encapsulation of beauty instilled in seasonal life transitions and a sensibility that, "Hope springs eternal."¹

Time spent tending gardens throughout my life sparked an affinity for growth patterns and the beauty of botanicals that I was able to use as a visual source of metaphor for longings, disappointments, and resiliency in my thesis exhibition, *Seeds Once Sown*. In forms of decorative embellishment in a domicile, botanicals and flora resonate as familiar and unoffending to the senses, often seen as symbol of both celebration and catharsis in times of joy and loss. They also serve as a means of locating myself in the transitory narrative of moving from South Louisiana to Western Montana; the landscapes of inspiration transition from that of lush overgrowth affected by humid

¹ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* (New York, Mayard, Merrill & Co.), 1890. 16.

climes, where my own familial abundance was cause for nostalgic association, to a place of long rolling passage through the arid mountain majesty, millions of years in the making, invites pause for solitary thoughts.

To reconcile perceptions of female expectations in light of realistic outcomes, the idealized domestic space where formality and dilapidation coexist with botanicals is the aesthetic of the autobiographical context of *Seeds Once Sown*. The 'home' melds together an acknowledgement of matriarchal influence that formed my identity as a homemaker and mother, but also serves as a place of independent contemplation on a mid-life passage through a seasonal change of life, now separate from domestic adherences.

Studio Practice

As a young girl, my parents modeled a life of creative pursuit, introducing me to woodworking, furniture restoration, photography, stained glass, pottery, sewing, and more. Hours spent handing my father tools in his garage woodshop and begging my mother to demystify the magic of crochet signaled an appreciation for the subtle ingenuities of traditional domestic craft that is part of my mixed-media practice today. What came to be was that the home was as much a place to make art as it was an inspiration. Today, my studio is an extension of home, filled with an odd collection of materials that have contextual reference to homemaking almost exclusively acquired from grocery, hardware, hobby or second-hand stores.

Repetition of small gestures, progress by means of accumulation, and unrefined marks of the maker's hand were attributes I want to expose in my ceramic and textile botanicals, in relation to ideals of women's traditional handcraft. Each material flower, fruit, leaf, or stem reveals a continuity of process and problem-solving, layered and composed into a holistic experience with acquired objects or construction strewn about my studio space.



Figure 1: Susan Sinitiere

The act of making in layers of process allows for two scenarios in the formation of a piece. One is mastering a technique, altering and amending a pattern of making that suits a spontaneous and natural sensibility desired in the finished work; this is especially true of my ceramic process. If an object, say a ceramic flowerhead, is even partially successful, it is worth

repeating and often changes in method are subtle enough that by the time I make many, the sheer abundance of the collection masks technical changes and imperfections of individual objects. A collection of completed parts guide the conceptual and visual emphasis of a mixed-media piece, replete with the gestures of labor in plain view (see fig.1).

The second reason for working in this way is simply time. I may begin work with a notion of an idea, but it is rare that a concept is not altered by sitting with acquired objects, constantly considering how they may contextualize broader notions or how technical challenges may change the structure of an idea. Beginning with individual bits of fruit or petals in mass is akin to one stitch in a knitted shawl. It can be a fairly mindless act of repetition contributing to the whole that affords time spent contemplating object associations. Very often, a piece is not fully realized until all components are installed in an exhibition, where I can make formal visual decisions with the various elements of the piece.

Exhibition

The trappings of a home are designated for the needs and comfort of those present. A place for the mind quieted over time is the intent with which *Seeds Once Sown* was installed in the Gallery of Visual Arts at the University of Montana. Five pieces compose a holistic installation reminiscent of a home setting with implied interior and exterior spaces of a home. Each of the ‘interior’ pieces foster personal associations to Southern Louisiana, as does the ‘exterior’ piece. Two specifically, though, are in response to more recent experiences in Montana, while still referencing my cultural background. Each of these pieces is designed as a botanical composition that emulates decorative floral arrangement and natural landscapes accordingly. In this thesis, location guides a conceptual interpretation of each piece in the installation, which I made as parts of my passage through life as a female, beginning first with my origin state of Louisiana.

Faded Blushes

Faded Blushes (see fig. 2) is the first piece in the installation. seen as one takes a right into the ‘interior’ gallery space through an arched doorway, as a dichotomy of internal and external placement either upon the porch of home aged by time or a formal parlor within that very home. There sits an antique formal sitting chair, quaint in size, overtaken with a decorative floral arrangement of soft peach and pink clusters of ceramic buds and fully matured flowers loosely resembling the paper-thin blooms of azaleas. The ceramic blossoms, pale by comparison to the hot pink azaleas, appear to fall into decay through the seat; the cane that once supported a person now absent. This chair sits at a skewed angle atop a pedestal constructed of weathered gray planks and

rotten posts, affected by the wear of time. Beneath the wooden chair ornate with veneer and lathed detailing, low arm rests, and a blemished surface in need of restoration, lies a pile of blanch withered ceramic petals seemingly fallen from wilted stems of spent flowers that spill through the center of the seat. In what appears beautiful at first sight, this three-dimensional still-life evidences a gradual reckoning with age captured in phases of growth and decline, as the petals ‘fall’ from the formal arrangement.

The notion of being placed on a pedestal for one’s beauty or idealized domestic worth was one that I slowly became wary of in the course of a long, yet still failed, marriage. Hope arose that my daughters’ might define themselves by their merits of choice and I began to reflect on the circumstances of the women who influenced my path into domesticity, finding some poignancy in a self-beautification manual written in the era of my grandmothers’ young adulthood; “Worn and weary she must have been, but her trunk held a ‘best dress.’ Pioneer, she still ‘prettied up’ for her courting days. Grandma was wooed, got married, had her babies, and made homes. She did these things with little gestures of love and loveliness that keep beauty alive even through a period when beauty seemed superfluous.”² Bennett’s words, that strive to make women prioritize vanity as a loving female duty in a time of war and strife, are counter to the realities in which they actually may define their self-worth ultimately; the superficiality

² Joan Bennett, *How to be Attractive* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff), 1943. 4.



Figure 2: Susan Sinitiere

of advice, that makes light of the pursuit of knowledge, is devaluing of woman's potential.

My mother's mother was a woman of fashionable beauty and a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse before marrying. As her three daughters grew, she placed the value of vanity and domestic aspiration above any eccentricity of rugged independence. Her favored daughter degreed in Home Economics. My mother suffered for equal shares of love as the 'tomboy' with merely a degree in History, minor in English. Mom struggled to feel a sufficient woman, lacking

in skills of adorned attraction. And yet, she followed in a traditional path of devotion, children, abandonment of career aspirations. Conversely, my father's mother lacked any opportunity for higher education and bore seven children; it was not an option for her to hope for more.

Dependency was a moral obligation and sense of security, but in every situation, the marriage was less than ideal. Pledging 'for better or worse' was met with challenges of poverty, alcoholism, infidelity, and nervous breakdown. Yet each woman stayed the course, set by the age of twenty-two, because to do otherwise was shameful, failing. The silver linings to which they each clung were many. This model fomented the path I

started down and eventually deviated from, but it was one that I wanted my daughters to be acutely aware of before the prime of their youth was beholden to another.

In the construction of *Faded Blushes*, the springtime pageantry of vivid azalea blooms in my hometown of Lafayette became a primary inspiration. So spectacular that an official Azalea Trail was mapped for some twenty miles of viewing. It is a brief display of awe ending abruptly in mounds of fallen petals. I wanted to capture that fragility with an abundance of ceramic blossoms. Michael Sherrill's botanical sculpture responding to the flora of North Carolina, which he deems 'natural narratives', became the ideal model for both concept and structure. Joan Falconer Byrd describes his thematic approach as, "the poignant beauty that may be found in living beings even in decay", evidenced in a piece titled *Flourish Rhododendron*.³ (see fig. 3) Sitting atop an ephemeral display of brightly colored porcelain leaves, tattered and curling up in decay, three rhododendron blossoms transition from fresh display to seed supported by a bended branch cast in bronze that mimics natural growth.



Figure 3: Michael Sherrill

With Sherrill's work in mind, I began the delicate task of crafting each petal by hand, five to a bloom, manifesting an individual character to every flower; no two being the same. To carry forward a human experience, I chose to finish the flowers in pale colors

³ Joan Falconer Byrd, "Natural Narratives," *American Craft* 70, no. 2 (2010): 38-45, <https://www.craftcouncil.org/article/natural-narratives>.

and subtle sheens reminiscent of flesh; the soft pinks also typified a feminine context. The fusion of steel ‘stems’, on which blossoms and buds are mounted, emerge from the seat of the chair indicating a separation from their ‘roots’, just as cut flowers in a decorative arrangement are.

Dishwater Blues

Dishwater Blues (see fig. 5) is a display of several ceramic hydrangea blooms, in light shades of blue and purple that emerge from a vintage boxed window hanging ajar and flanked by two aged panels of lath slats and plaster oozing into the ‘interior’ as though someone were standing inside a dilapidated home, looking out. The mass of blooms appears to flow into the room from behind the window pane, stripped of its paint, and merge with the ‘interior’ surface of the partial wall panels. Slightly left of center and beneath the display of blooms, a baby blue enamel wash basin hangs from a rusted nail below the bottommost flowerhead that has a tinge of clear turquoise resin drips,



Figure 4: Susan Sinitiere

emulating Dawn Dish Soap, on its surface. The visual effect is that of home in disrepair, where daily labor lapses into daydreamt space.

As a child visiting a friend's grandmother's home, I could not help but marvel at the enormous blue hydrangea bush that appeared as tall as the small wooden house itself. Her grandmother shared with me the knowledge of changing the vivid hues of bigleaf hydrangea blooms from lush magenta pinks to shades of cerulean blue by simply dumping used dishwater over their roots. It seemed fantastic to a child's mind, but as a homemaker I began to ponder this as knowledge of women kindred in their daily labors of the home. Having spent many hours of my life standing before a sink washing dish after dish with each meal served, I would often let my mind wander beyond a task so mundane. The kitchen sink became the site of an increasingly melancholic introspection on my life, past, present, and future. The perpetual action of my hands did not pair with unfulfilled desires of my mind. Unresolved home projects and the needs of loved ones cycled through my head in equal measure with thoughts of past ambitions and rapidly passing time.

It was not until I went back to university in middle-age, that I came to know of Louise Bourgeois' work in depth. A mother-artist creating so prolifically on such topics as domesticity, unresolved memory, and gender dynamics was someone with whom I could identify. Her series of paintings titled, *Femme Maison*, (see fig. 5) were especially potent in resonance of my own domestic experience. In critique of this series, Will Gompertz writes of Bourgeois' images of a nude woman whose head is replaced with a house on fire, "These paintings succinctly sum up the struggle of every woman and their destiny to live with the responsibilities and constrictions of trying to maintain the balance of wife, mother and housekeeper while trying to retain a semblance of individuality in such sapping domestic circumstances. The simplicity of the paintings

adds to the sense of entrapment; there wasn't the time for anything more studied or crafted.”⁴

This was my reality as a married mother of five and duty to that role was not optional in a partnership where one provided and the other tended to the home. In the words of French Philosopher, Luce Irigaray, “...that home, which is usually paid for by man’s labor (this the law of the land, as well as the religious law) encloses her, places her in *internal exile*...”.⁵ A static place for washing dishes and children alike symbolizes my feelings as a woman in such an arrangement.

Growth evidenced by hydrangeas in *Dishwater Blues*, stems from the escapism of the mind in redundant domestic tasks. Visualizing natural wonders invading a space otherwise devoid of stimulating thought encapsulated the struggles between internal and external experience. By extension, this piece was executed with the same patience required of women’s traditional handcraft; a single petal equivalent of a stitch in a finely embroidered embellishment as it were. Though seen as a passive activity apart from necessary daily tasks, handcraft was no less laborious or disquieting of longings to apply one’s mind intellectually.

Inspired by the lush floral constructions of textile and ceramics artist, Rebecca Hutchinson, whose work is made by processing recycled materials into paper pulp



Figure 5: Louise Bourgeois

⁴ Will Gompertz, “My Life in Art: The day Bourgeois moved me to tears,” *The Guardian*, October 8, 2008, <https://theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/oct/07/louise.bourgeois>.

⁵ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 65.

mixed with clay, turning that paper into small delicate forms and assembling them into arrangements of abstracted flora, as in *Bold Red Four Square*. (see fig. 6) Of her concept in part, she writes, “I explore the ideas of obstacles that are presented and are overcome



Figure 6: Rebecca Hutchinson

during growth.”⁶ Though her sentiment and process extend into much of my work, her influence most directly prompted the making of the individual hydrangea flower heads I created for this piece.

Hundreds of small porcelain squares were formed first into petals and later amassed onto hand built base forms. This culminated into a collection of several ceramic

flower heads that were integrated with the elements of an actual home. The color transitions of the glaze mimic the appearance of affected hydrangea which seems to drain away as soap again in the cyclical process of throwing out dirty water again and again. The acts of labor in the production of this piece were a choice of willingness and less facing a station in life without end.

⁶ Rebecca Hutchinson, “About,” accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.rebeccahutchinson.com/about-1>.

Our Birds Eat the Ones I Leave

At the far end of the ‘interior’ gallery, an antique table with a squared top and spindle legs stands near the wall, with an abundant ceramic display of overripe figs, dark red and pocked on the surface, peeking out from an array of tattered fig leaves, all emerging in mass from an anomalous ovular raw terracotta form, that sits atop a silver platter; one that a hostess might serve guests a fine meal on. The carved undulating edge of the wooden top, finely crafted legs and finish revealing the oak wood grain give a sense of formality in an era passed. Similar in presentation of *Faded Blushes*, there is a likening of a feminine experience in the posturing of the botanical composition. However, the feminine sentiment of *Our Birds Eat the Ones I Leave* (see fig. 7) is attached to feelings of relevance beyond a woman’s child-bearing years.



Figure 7: Susan Sinitiere

As years passed with each pregnancy, my merit as a wife had become intertwined with my fertility, but after the birth of my fifth child I opted to close the procreative chapter of my life with a tubal ligation surgery. And yet, I’d just entered into my 30’s, still fertile by nature’s design, and cherished each journey of development shared with

my children in utero. I was empathetically aware of other women's various struggles with fertility and premature losses of wanted children, but I was not prepared for the grief that accompanied the loss of ever bearing another child and it washed over me like a crashing wave. The end was abrupt, all too logical, and irreversible.

So many times, my mother expressed sadness about her own fertility struggles. I was a happy surprise after ten long years of trying to conceive again after my brother was born. Sadder still, she suffered an emergency hysterectomy before age 40. We shared feelings about what could have been that bound to our separate experiences.

I wanted to make a piece that symbolized the transience of female fertility inevitable of every woman's experience and how it can transform one's identity in their domestic role. As a young mother and wife, fecundity was felt as the primary bond in my marriage. Nesting instincts gave an all-consuming purpose to the creation of a comfortable home. My perceptions of value shifted on the paradigm of infertility. Domesticity turned to maintaining a home and family, rather than building one.

These sentiments gave structure to the decorative formality of *Our Birds Eat the Ones I Leave*, as a table set by the consummate hostess. The near-to-rot ceramic delicacies served up in this display represent parts of a woman's body, hidden from sight, that become useless over time despite the attention and concern they demand from adolescence to middle-age. Asked about the use of domestic objects in personal artworks about her own menopause, Gabrielle Roberts-Dalton responds, "I prefer to think of these items as symbols. You feel like you are a vessel, with objects such as the cup representing your womb, left hanging, eggs showing they are no longer needed and clothing discarded. It is more about the passing of time, which is why I have chosen



Figure 8: Gabrielle Roberts-Dalton

items such as a birthday cake to represent this’, referencing her drawing *Slice* (see fig. 8), 2018.⁷

In my youth, I spent summers with my maternal grandparents picking figs so overgrown and abundant in the Louisiana clime that it brought much conversation and jam to the gathering table. My grandmother’s handwritten words updating me on the status of the harvest made the choice of figs, so often used in visual allegories of fertility, more poignant, 40 years on.

‘Dear Susan,

...If you were here, I’d get you to help me pick figs. Our trees have grown so large until we have to climb up in them, or we use a step ladder to pick the figs. Even then, I can’t get all of them! Our birds like to eat the ones I leave.

Lots of love,

Grandmother Green’⁸

⁷ April-Lena Wayne, “On Display at the RBSA: Gabrielle Roberts-Dalton,” Midland Art Papers, July 18, 2018, <https://blog/bham.ac.uk/map/2018/07/18/on-display-at-the-rbsa-gabrielle-roberts-dalton/>.

⁸ Elva Green, written correspondence to author, June 30, 1982.

I Can't Unsee You

I Can't Unsee You (see fig. 9) is a composition of numerous stems of Mountain Ash berries that emerge from the white gallery wall in appearance of the fruit hanging from the tree separate from its leaves. The clusters of berries, in their larger-than-life scale, are dripping with a saturated color of bright yellow, orange, and deep red that streams together like melted wax crayons. Black steel modeling the natural stem system supports the dense berry clusters, drooping with gravity, that are delicately suspended away from the surface of the wall. The installation of berries is framed by two white half-columns to the left and right of composition and a salvaged baseboard, aged with jade and black paint chipping away from its surface, is affixed at the floor. Monochromatic shadows cast through the linear stems and masses of ceramic fruit span a 10' wall width and feel reminiscent of an ink drawing, in their stillness and reverence to purity of nature.



Figure 9: Susan Sinitiere

The first time I experienced the striking reddish-orange color of the fruit bore by the Mountain Ash tree happened more than a year after relocating to Montana, alone in my new journey. I was awe-struck by the fluorescence of color poking through the greenery of spring and summer. These clusters of berries suddenly seemed inescapable from my view after that first sighting, all along my daily paths. My sudden fascination turned into an almost compulsive pursuit of capturing that mass of color and form by any means necessary to preserve the “resonances of this contemplation of grandeur”.⁹

Similar to *Dishwater Blues*, I aimed to create a place in the home where the mind seamlessly fuses together walls of a domestic confinement, often decoratively adorned with reproductions of nature, with a three-dimensional fantasy enlivened by the presence of the berries. *I Can't Unsee You* retains a sense of contemplation of the spectacular that distracts from worries of home. This piece encapsulates a solitary experience that French philosopher Gaston Bachelard explains, “...make us sense clearly the progressive expansion of the daydream up to the ultimate point when immensity that is born intimately, in a feeling of ecstasy, dissolves and absorbs, as it were the perceptible world.”¹⁰

The structure of the berries was modeled after the floral constructions embellishing the sides of Mardi Gras floats, in my mother's hometown of New Orleans, part of a Catholic tradition that celebrates the end of the sacrificial Lenten season. The brightly colored paper flower sculptures stand out from the side of the enormous floats, larger than life, bouncing about in the constant movement along the parade route, eliciting an awe of the grandiose, not unlike that which Bachelard describes in spirit. My welded

⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Penguin Books, 2014), 201.

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Penguin Books, 2014), 211.

steel construction of the individual stems bears the weight of hundreds of glazed ceramic berries, amassed as clusters. Though still in appearance with accompanying shadows, they bounce in their secure compositional placement with the slightest of touch.

The excitement of this Catholic revel is one that my mother delights in reminiscing every carnival season that passes. Her exuberance of attachment to it by her chosen faith is one that I could relate to upon the renewal of joyous interaction with the natural surrounds of Montana. It was my own epiphany of sorts that to be overwhelmed again in mid-life by the unexpected journey beyond domestic constrictions, made to feel like a child cheering the marvel of the floats.

Scarlet Fire

Placed in the 'exterior' hallway of the gallery space, seven stalks of sculpted mullein plants, an alien-looking weed commonly passed by in the mountainous Montana landscape, stand at heights between three and seven feet tall. Each is topped with cloth dyed in shades of bright yellow and ochre to cover the flowery tops resembling tridents with multiple prongs. The gnarled leaves covered in translucent brown pantyhose, abundant to each stalk, taper in size from broad long forms at the bottom to truncated leaflets ending at the base of the flowers. The stalks and leaves, made of subtly curved steel, are covered in a patina of crusted orange rust; exposed in gaps of reveal between the variety of leaf shapes, heightening the linear quality of each. Barely erect, a partition of a charred wooden buck fence, common to the framing of homestead acreage, stands intermixed in the grouping of mixed-media stalks. Its striking oversized, linear

appearance, triangulated in form, contrasts with the organic arrangement of mullein, all standing in front of a brilliant scarlet red-orange wall staging the piece, titled *Scarlet Fire*. (see fig. 10)



Figure 10: Susan Sinitiere

Prior to relocating, I'd never experienced scenes of wildfire with its meandering lines of flame, like those engulfing mountain forests in the Montana landscape. However, travel throughout the state revealed a sobering

account of scorched homestead landscapes and blanketed smoke affecting breathing. Retreading certain paths revealed nature's persistence of regrowth, beginning usually with weeds and wildflowers. With consideration of how the land was essentially healing itself with these modest botanicals, I began looking into the medicinal attributes of these plants, prompted in part by my roots to Acadian culture in which Cajun French *traiteurs* traditionally practiced faith healing combining Catholic prayer and herbal remedy.

Claire Shaver Haughton writes about such herbal remedies, in *Green Immigrants: The Plants That Transformed America*. Her introductory words about the mullein align with my cultural, domestic, experiential and healing ideals for this piece, "Our roadsides are like the borders of church linens, embroidered with elaborate detail and changing

their colors with the seasons. Dominating the background of the design along many railroad tracks and highways are the tall, gray-green clumps of mullein.”¹¹

Mullein, to my surprise, is utilized in the treatment of respiratory ailments, ingested as a tea or, ironically, inhaled as smoke. It surely would be part of the faith healing practice of the *traiteurs*, had it grown local to South Louisiana.

Aiding in ideas of resilience after loss and our essential connectivity to the natural world, artist Tracey Linder provided conceptual, material, and structural inspiration for the making of *Scarlet Fire*. In her piece, titled *Wheat*, (see fig. 11) the viewer stands amongst three mixed-media sculptures of wheat spikes hovering in suspension above the ground, enlarged to human scale. One cannot help being confronted by the material covering of each kernel, wrapped in a softened yellow leather, with long blades of grass dyed red emerging from the clusters of kernels in natural effect of the over scaled food source of the animal whose hide embellishes its surface. In her own words, “It is a complex relationship that involves joy, heartache, struggle, vulnerability and resilience. I study species both plant and animal, wild and domestic to gain a sense of our

¹¹ Claire Shaver Haughton, *Green Immigrants: The Plants that Transformed America* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1978), 224-225.

mortality. I see both beauty and heartache in death, the inevitability of the circle of life.”¹²

In the construction of this piece, materiality of my domestic past provided for a humble tactility that recontextualizes feminine influence in the home contrasting with the charred fencing of protection of the homestead, fallen to the ground in crossed axes, that vies for attention in this idealized vignette of the west. On my stove, yards of cheesecloth and cotton cloth were dyed in Shibori method, in which marbles were tied into pockets of cloth before being immersed in pots of turmeric and rusted iron solutions. These holistic natural dyes also support the well-being of respiratory and immunity function of one’s body. The patterned textiles were layered like bandages over bulky



Figure 11: Tracey Linder

foundations of steel scouring pads affixed to the steel mullein structures at the top to mimic the bright yellow flower heads of spring, transitioning into shades of ochre and rust orange. Remnants of pantyhose in the shade of ‘nude’, a staple of women’s fashion to mask imperfections, cover the leaf forms, stretched to allow for an ethereal passage of light and reveal the strong steel structure beneath. No less was the scarlet red chosen to frame the scene for its allusion to the burning fires or sunseting skies, as it was for its

¹² Tracey Linder, “About,” accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.traceylinder.com/about>.

feminine namesake. Regrowth born out of devastation, created with vestiges of home, is indicative of a healing period in which endurance of natural will moves one forward through the landscape of life.

Conclusion

Sharing the autobiographical accounts of how women close to my heart affected the conceptual development of my thesis exhibition, *Seeds Once Sown*, afforded me an opportunity to reflect on the complexities of struggle they faced in course of domestic duty, no less affected by their own pasts. Our lives each reflect a reckoning with an inevitable aging process, despite staying the course of less-than-ideal circumstances or forging a path that deviates from strictures of maintaining a familial home. The making of this exhibition was a cathartic expression of loving understanding of these women's life passages and the wisdom gleaned from their experience, as well as an opportunity to communicate forward the value of female perspectives as a source of resilience and fortitude to my extended lineage.

I've witnessed stubborn devotion turn to grief in widowhood and senility that reveals true emotions about partnerships, from these very same women. Somehow, in the face of loss, a reawakening of personal affinities and longed-for identities became opportune of the moment; another silver lining. There is a beauty to be found in the witness of struggle, learned in the home and tended to in gardens of perennial regrowth.

Image List

Figure 1: Susan Sinitiere, *Studio process*, 2022.

Figure 2: Susan Sinitiere, *Faded Blushes*, porcelain, steel, reclaimed furniture, 2022.

Figure 3: Michael Sherill, *Flourish Rhododendron*, porcelain, cast bronze, 2008, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.michaelsherrill.com/>.

Figure 4: Susan Sinitiere, *Dishwater Blues*, porcelain, lath and plaster, found objects, 2022.

Figure 5: Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, paint on canvas, 1947, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/louise-bourgeois/femme-maison-1947-1>.

Figure 6: Rebecca Hutchinson, *Bold Red Four Square*, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, date unknown, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.rebeccahutchinson.com/>.

Figure 7: Susan Sinitiere, *Our Birds Eat the Ones I Leave Behind*, terracotta, found objects, 2022.

Figure 8: Gabrielle Roberts-Dalton, *Slice*, ink on paper, 2018, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/map/2018/07/18/on-display-at-the-rbsa-gabrielle-roberts-dalton/>.

Figure 9: Susan Sinitiere, *I Can't Unsee You*, porcelain, steel, reclaimed wood, 2022.

Figure 10: Susan Sinitiere, *Scarlet Fire*, steel, textiles, wood, 2002.

Figure 11: Tracey Linder, *Wheat*, leather, dyed grass, polyester, resin, fiberglass, 2007, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.tracylinder.com/wheat>.

Bibliography

Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin Books, 2014.

Bennett, Joan, *How to Be Attractive*. New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1943.

Byrd, Joan Falconer. "Natural Narratives." *American Craft* 70, no.2 (2010): 38-45,
<https://www.craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/natural-narratives>.

Gompertz, Will. "My life in art: The day Bourgeois moved me to tears", *The Guardian*,
October 8, 2008.
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/oct/07/louise.bourgeois>.

Green, Elva. Written correspondence to author. June 30, 1982.

Haughton, Claire Shaver. *Green Immigrants: The Plants that Transformed America*.
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978.
<https://archive.org/details/greenimmigrantsp0000haug/page/n7/mode/2up?q=mullein&view=theater>

Hutchinson, Rebecca. "About." Accessed April 15, 2022.
<https://www.rebeccahutchinson.com/about-1>.

Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press,
1993.

Linder, Tracey. "About". Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://www.tracylinder.com/about>

Pope, Alexander, *An Essay on Man*, New York, Maynard, Merrill & Co., 1890.

Wayne, April-Lena. "On Display at the RBSA: Gabrielle Roberts-Dalton." *Midland Art Papers*, July 18, 2018. <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/map/2018/07/18/on-display-at-the-rbsa-gabrielle-roberts-dalton/>.