Dear Sycamore

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Dear Sycamore
Introduction
If my practice was a color, it would be blue.

Blue is the color of sky and water, existing high above our bodies and deep below the ground; blue is all around us. Blue is the color of processing – x-rays, blueprints, and cyanotypes. It is the color of seeing through and seeing past. It becomes a physical emotion, as people have bouts of “feeling blue.” It is the color of sentimentalists. It is a color of our world and beyond it – with ultramarine literally meaning “beyond the sea.” Extracted from stone, ultramarine at one point was the most expensive pigment, more expensive than gold, limiting its use in painting to only the most important of subjects.¹ This exclusivity ironically opposes the big blue sky, which is free and limitless.

Blue is soft and gentle. It is both the color of sadness and the color of bliss. In her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit² describes the color: “For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go.”³ Children often ask, “Why is the sky blue?” This question leads to an abstract answer about scattering participles in the atmosphere, far from any graspable understanding that can be held and touched. Blue is both a tangible, physical existence in our world (blue jeans, blueberries, ultramarine paint) and intangible (horizons, sky, “feeling blue”). Blue holds both absence and presence.

Blue sometimes enters my practice literally through materials like blue crayons and acrylic paint, but it is more so blue as a space, an ungraspable sense, a feeling between deep love and deep loss, that my practice exists within. It is my sincere longing for trees, plants, seeds, and weather in my nearby surroundings that catalyzed the production of my recent work. My
emotions of love for these beings stand close to emotions of grief, as I am aware that time will eventually take hold and end their current state of existence. This love cripples my capacity to try and render or construct an image through my own expression, and instead, prompts a development of systems. These systems of making seek to remove my hand through routine physical actions – wrapping, tracing, sorting, staining, and stretching. My routines result in rubbings, sculptures, and paintings that attempt to preserve my beloved beings through indexical impressions, creating a state of stasis that contradicts their inherent fleetingness.

A blue space of distance especially arrives when the material of my action separates from the host, creating a mournful gap between the two entities. What I am left with is an impression that temporarily gives me ease and comfort, knowing that a record will remain – a proof of existence within the environment’s unending cycle of growth and decay. The work becomes a timestamp of love and memory.

This text follows the meandering path of doubt, questioning, and ways of working that I have developed in my recent practice. I will frame my recent rubbings, paintings, and sculptures through a narrative of experiences, references, and processes developed between 2021 to 2023. I will begin with describing how trees and walking came together to form an interdependent relationship within my practice and challenged the role I want to have as an artist. I explore the concept of space within the history of landscape painting and in rubbings. I then explain touch as a subject and process in the context of rubbings and how touch is used to explore connection and sensitivity. Lastly, I will discuss play as a tool to reject hierarchies within art and to express joy, curiosity, and wonder.
Walking and Trees
I came to my love of sycamore trees by way of my daily commute. During the routine of moving from one place to the other, my slow mode of transport, either by foot or by bike, is my chance to track changes within my environment. The procession of sycamores lining my path act as pillars of comfort. While these trees certainly don’t need me, I found that over time, I needed them. The sycamores give me a sense of security, which can possibly be explained by Rebecca Solnit’s insights:

There’s an Etruscan word, *saeculum*, that describes the span of time lived by the oldest person present, sometimes calculated to be about a hundred years. In a looser sense, the word means the expanse of time during which something is in living memory. Every event has its saeculum, and then its sunset when the last person who fought in the Spanish Civil War or the last person who saw the last passenger pigeon is gone. To us, trees seemed to offer another kind of saeculum, a longer time scale and deeper continuity, giving shelter from our ephemerality the way that a tree might offer literal shelter under its boughs.  

Trees are portals, granting access to a timespan extending far beyond my own. Without any extensive scientific background or knowledge, I have become a tree-watcher, walking routine paths as I obsess over sycamores’ subtle tones in layered bark. I study their teal, brown, white, and grey patterning. Rather than expanding with growth, I’ve learned that sycamores’ bark flakes off like a snake’s skin as a form of renewal from the external elements. Each season gives me a new perspective: in the fall, I see their big leaves act like baskets collecting water, in early winter, their white branches stretch like gangly bones against the cold blue sky, and from winter into spring, the branches drop and dissipate their jewel-like seeds. Their grit and heartiness make them well suited for urban environments, capable of sustaining tough, congested conditions.

After a certain point, I began walking this route not just to get to school and back but to visit these trees. I would track their changes with each passing. At first, the walking invited the looking, but soon enough the looking prompted the walking.
As my obsession with the sycamores grew, so did my fear of making art about them. When I attempted to depict the trees in paint, I felt doubt, like I was painting a portrait of a close family member or friend. I questioned how a painting, translated through my hand and limited skillset, could possibly contribute anything more to a person’s real complexity. My abbreviated translation would never be able to fully capture their actual beauty. After a period of stagnation when considering the sycamores, I came to a question: *How can I possibly make something more beautiful than these trees?* I began to accept that I could not invent or construct an artwork that would be more beautiful than the tree itself. This realization led to initial discouragement – I felt entirely stuck as to what my next move would be. However, I was also relieved. It was liberating to accept that my artwork would never be able to exceed the beauty I saw in the real world.

Embracing my new position, I turned to a small pile of collected sycamore branches sitting in my studio. I began charting this lost territory with the security of material experiments. I wrapped leftover canvas scrap around the limb and traced the surface. The rubbing was not exact and did not remotely resemble the sycamore branch, but it felt more sincere to the feeling I was pursuing.

It was this move that prompted me to begin making rubbings of entire tree trunks.
The rubbing begins with a routine step of operations. I prepare a large sheet of muslin fabric, large enough to fit the size of the entire trunk of my selected tree. The day of the rubbing I set out towards the tree with a prepared bag. The bag includes the muslin, wax crayons, snacks, water, and thumb tacks. I begin by wrapping, or swaddling, the tree in the muslin, tacking into the bark at the tallest height my arms can reach. I navigate the tree’s form as I stretch the fabric and pull it around the entire circumference. There is an active give-and-take between me, the fabric, and the tree. As I pin, I sculpt, caress, and mold this new outer layer of muslin skin, snuggly covering the trunk’s entire base. I unveil the tree’s intricacies as I begin drawing wax crayon along the surface. It is a slow reveal.
Fig. 2. Anna Schenker, 7.30.22 - 8.3.22, *VT* (in process), 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 3. Anna Schenker, 8.5.22 - 8.8.22, *VT* (in process), 2022. Courtesy of the artist.
The process of rubbing is a physically demanding commitment. The entire activity takes hours, days, as I obsessively cover the entire surface in crayon. The muslin catches traces and stains that record the presence of grass, dirt, wind, rain, and my footsteps. I reach to the top of the muslin and move down to the base of the roots – crouching, bending, squatting, and sitting. While capturing a physical record of the tree’s body, I capture a record of the capacity of my own body as well. Relinquishing part of my control to a systematic way of working felt liberating. The process grants me access to a system of restrictions where I feel more like a translator or recorder, rather than an artist. This role more closely reflects the control and authority, or lack thereof, that I want to have within my work.

Fig. 4. Anna Schenker, 7.30.22 - 8.3.22, VT (in process), 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Western landscape paintings were historically romantic expressions of limitless, expansive vistas. Groups like the Hudson River School painters depicted deep, uncultivated space to symbolize status, power, and authority. I approach working with landscape in opposition to
ideas of elitism. Rather, I create an intimacy through the flating of space and focus on tactility. I hope to challenge conventions of landscape painting through the use of indexical processes that engage directly with my immediate natural surroundings.

My rubbings remove the Western traditions of linear perspective, which aid in orienting viewers within a two-dimensionally rendered three-dimensional space. Instead, the rubbing provides a surface translation at a one-to-one scale. Scientist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer explains her views on intimacy and care for the environment in brief, simple statements: “You don’t show your love and care by putting what you love behind a fence. You have to be involved. You have to contribute to the well-being of the world.” Kimmerer’s description clarified my need for the process of rubbings. Historical Western landscape painting goes in a different direction than what Kimmerer proposes. Deep space creates a barrier between the physical land, the artist, and the viewer, whereas the surface of a rubbing attempts to remove this barrier and there is an inevitable intimacy through the physical act of its own rendering.

My piece, 7.30.22 - 8.3.22, VT, 2022–23 (crayon, muslin, and wood, 13’ 6” x 9’ 10” x 18”) is a rubbing of a tree in a precarious state between dead and alive. This tree is one I have come to know well throughout my life, and I sought to pay tribute with a rubbing. Once removed from the tree, the rubbing became a flattened trace with a towering presence.
Michelle Stuart is an artist who similarly explores a sense of intimate space within image construction. Stuart’s piece, *Paradisi: A Garden Mural*, 1985–86 (beeswax, plants, and pigments, 198” x 396”) includes 648 rag-paper squares mounted on canvas in a grid. I cannot help but consider the physical act of the making of this work, in which Stuart densely embedded vegetation, flower pedals, and earth into encaustic relief blocks. From a distance, an abstract,
all-over painting arises, but close-looking prompts looking at the gentle handling of the minute elements of earth.¹⁰

Fig. 6. Michelle Stuart, *Paradisi: A Garden Mural*, 1985–86, beeswax, plants, and pigments, 198” x 396.” Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 7. Michelle Stuart, *Paradisi: A Garden Mural* (detail), 1985–86, beeswax, plants, and pigments, 198” x 396.” Courtesy of the artist and *Artforum.*
During my walks, I witness sensations and visual clues to time, connection, and lifecycles part of a timespan extending far beyond my own. Suzanne Simard\(^\text{11}\) explains how trees as symbols of connection have a material and physical connective actuality. Trees engage in a form of conversation, one of negotiation, compromise, and interdependence through mycorrhizae networks below the ground.\(^\text{12}\) This biological research grounds my sentiments and feelings of connection with the proof of an actual productive network of parts working together for the goodness of the whole. Countering ideas of survival of the fittest and competition, Simard’s research suggests a system of symbiosis and reciprocity, one in which all beings care for each other and foster each other’s growth.\(^\text{13}\) Trees hold a moral character, and I believe we can learn about generosity and kindness from these beings.

Carolee Schneemann’s depictions of landscape during the 1950s to 1960s\(^\text{14}\) examine a sense of interconnectedness through dense, visceral brush strokes and shallow depth-of-field. Schneemann’s painting, *Secret Garden*, 1956 (oil on canvas, 25” x 23 1/4” x 1 3/8”) fills the canvas with bold, expressive brush strokes, depicting an abstracted space suggestive of a natural environment without a logical depiction of depth. I interpret this painting as an attempt to render these complex systems – a space and energy beyond herself, beyond a logical understanding, yet deeply rooted and dependent within her physical body. There is a sense of searching, of looking through the painting process. Analyses of Schneemann’s practice also suggest that her landscapes reject notions of male dominance over the land. Instead of viewing the land as passive and something to be controlled, she depicted nature as a collaborative force with power and agency.\(^\text{15}\) As I pursue processes to understand my small realm of nature, I resonate with the physicality of Schneemann’s frenetic painting. I see the physicality of my rubbings as attempting
to reach a space similar to that of Schneemann’s painting: uncontained and bursting from the seams of the canvas with a physically assertive presence.

Fig. 8. Carolee Schneemann, *Secret Garden*, 1956, oil on canvas, 25” x 23 ¼” x 1 3/8.” Courtesy of the artist and POWW Gallery.
Touch
The process of rubbing dates as far back as the invention of paper. Rubbings were used as a device to disseminate Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist texts on large stones around 100 A.D. The earliest known Chinese rubbings date between 627 and 649 A.D. during the Tang Dynasty. More recently, Max Ernst pioneered the name “frottage” in 1925 for the process of transferring texture, which is the technique in his *Histoire Naturelle (Natural History)* portfolio, published in 1926. Rubbings are also used educationally. Many people learn about rubbings as kids through an elementary school activity in which they collect leaves, lay out paper and create a crayon rubbing to begin understanding the intricate details of their subject. Rubbings are also commonly used as a method to record the names of loved ones at memorials and tombstones. At the 9/11 Memorial, for example, the site provides visitors the materials to make a rubbing of a chosen name engraved in the stone. You cannot take a memorial back with you, but a rubbing provides the chance to extend a memory of a person who has been lost.

Rubbings are misfits, straddling multiple mediums including painting, drawing, printmaking, and photography. Art critic Christopher Knight writes about the qualities of making a rubbing: “Frottage is tactile. Touchy-feely rather than slick, the engrossing surface quality slows down perception. Frottage is deliberate and unhurried, both in production and consumption.” Countering the prevailing urge for efficiency and ease in our ever-growing digital world, rubbing is a slow and patient process, showing both visible and invisible inscriptions within surfaces. This intimate way of recording produces an evident trace, a pictorial residue maintaining a physical tie to its referent.

Do Ho Suh’s 2016 project *Rubbing/Loving* is a monumental rubbing of the artist’s entire apartment and studio in New York and is meant to commemorate an architectural site which holds personal significance to him. Suh first began making rubbings to accurately measure
architectural dimensions for his large-scale fabric installations. For the *Rubbing/Loving* project, Suh used glue to meticulously cover and wrap all interior surfaces of his space with white paper and diligently rubbed every surface with colored pencil and pastel. His apartment on the ground floor and basement, known as the “blue room,” connects into the “pink corridor” which follows to his studio space: the “yellow room.” When describing the project’s significance, Suh explains, “The whole process is to remember the space, and also somehow, memorialize the space…When I discover it by rubbing, it just brought the memories associated with those details…if I write ‘rubbing’ in Korean, people can read it as ‘loving’ because there is no distinction in R and L in Korean alphabet. I think the gesture of rubbing is a very loving gesture.” From a distance, the piece looks like a flat drawing or architectural blueprints, but upon close examination, you see evidence of wrapping and the embossment of the paper, translating the architectural form of the original. When reflecting on the process, Suh describes, “The walls behind the paper are starting to talk to me, I’m reliving 20 years of time.”

Fig. 9. Do Ho Suh, *Rubbing/Loving*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and *Art21*. 
My work, *Floorboards, 1.7.23 - 1.8.23, 2023* (crayon on muslin, 84” x 96”) is a rubbing of the wooden kitchen floorboards in the house I grew up in. As the area of most activity, the kitchen floor is a site with which my family and I make constant contact. I know where nails protrude to catch on my socks, the rough indentations, and every floorboard’s unique quirks. This tree, in a manipulated state, is perhaps one of the oldest trees I have had the chance of knowing and studying. Still carrying traces of past life and history, the floorboards have termite trail marks and rings reflecting the life of the tree. By rubbing the floor’s entire surface, I captured the residue of both these trees’ lives and the physical record of touch between my family’s bodies and this site.

Fig. 10. Anna Schenker, *Floorboards, 1.7.23 - 1.8.23* (in process), 2023. Courtesy of the artist.
I have made rubbings in St. Louis, Missouri, Charlotte, Vermont, and Loftahammar, Sweden. The rubbings are site-dependent, relying on a physical location and a particular subject to exist. When making a rubbing, the crayon and my hand bear the most witness to a subject. There is a reliance on the host site because a record cannot be made without the sustained existence of the original source. The artwork in the end is the evidence of both the existence of the original and an intimate interaction of sight and touch. Rubbings are a process directly rooted in connection to the world and a revelation of what was already there. They are also an act of preservation, extending a moment in time through direct contact, fossilizing the subject beyond their own saeculum.
My methodical process-based approach carries emotional and sentimental weight. I find love and affection to be challenging to articulate and express, an abstracted feeling. But the gesture of a rubbing grounds me in a concrete reality, a present moment, and a physical expression between the subject and myself. Through the tangible gesture of making a rubbing, I can attempt to understand my own intangible, invisible, but nonetheless existent emotions and memory. The intimate act of a rubbing is an expression of love. I revisit Rebecca Solnit again as she discusses a correlation between place, memory, and love: “Perhaps it’s that you can’t go back in time, but you can return to the scenes of a love… the places are what remain, are what you can possess, are what is immortal. They become the tangible landscape of memory, the places that made you, and in some ways you too become them. They are what you can possess and what in the end possesses you.”

My piece Guinea Road, 8.9.22, 2022 (crayon on muslin, 84” x 70”) closely connects to Solnit’s reflections and investigates the role of walking. For this rubbing, I collected plants, flowers, leaves, and seeds from a road I regularly walk along in Vermont. There is a ditch on this road that always fills with wildflowers for a couple weeks during the summer. Once my mom returned from a walk along Guinea Road, and she said, “The wildflowers were so beautiful I could almost cry.” This comment always stuck with me. The amount of emotion engrained within that road, a path usually walked together with my mom, expressed itself through its delicate wildflowers. The flowers I collected on August 9th became imbued with this sentiment, this comment, and my mother. It was my last day in Vermont before leaving for St. Louis, so I brought the cut plant-life with me in my suitcase. Once I returned to St. Louis, I sprinkled them onto my apartment floor and made a rubbing from this trans-planted matter.
Fig. 12. Anna Schenker, collections from Guinea Road, VT. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 13. Anna Schenker, *Guinea Road, 8.9.22, 2022*, crayon on muslin, 84” x 70.” Courtesy of the artist.
The act of walking offers me a routine kinetic activity to track changes within my environment and is similar to the kinetic making of a rubbing. Both are repetitive mechanical activities used to develop an intimate relationship with my surroundings. I resonate with other contemporary artists who utilize walking as a conceptual framework, such as Helen Mirra. In her series titled *Hourly direction field notation*, 2011, Mirra utilizes her routine activity of walking within her current environment to develop a making process that she describes as “paced printmaking, made through walking.”

For each piece in this series, (oil and graphite on linen, 61” x 61”) Mirra sews two small stitches on the bottom of a linen drop cloth to mark south. She then carefully folds up the linen, which is sized perfectly to fit in her backpack that she brings on the walk. Over the course of a walking day, she makes seven iterations of printmaking, stopping every hour to make rubbings of stones, branches, and other found contents within her surroundings. While these rubbings, of course, record traces of that place, they also record her physical movement through the place. I see these rubbings as a compass, a clock, or even a self-portrait. For Mirra, the walking is the catalyst for the rubbings, while the rubbings also catalyze the walking – making the two kinetic activities interdependent.
I hope to connect to rubbings’ history and contemporary applications, hovering between its multiple associations of memory, loss, remembrance, and learning through touch. My work points at a way to understand and gain knowledge of the world through a tactile and physical gesture. Just as rubbings hold a timespan of their own record making and a residue of the physical, trees hold time through their own time-keeping system. Growth rings track the mark of time, and the ring’s thickness can, in fact, reflect changing environmental conditions. Rubbings create an imprint, suggestive of what was once there. Philosopher Charles Pierce defines index as a sign that will reveal a physical relationship with its referent and point towards meaning, though will not be directly related to the signified. A trace is a left mark that refers to its maker and how it was made. These signs are often caused by what they signify.
Artist Jennifer Bornstein created a series of rubbings of her father’s personal belongings in 2015. The contents spanned from his watch collection, to cassette tapes, extension cords, and socks. The works are blue encaustic wax on paper and titled with individual object names, creating an index or inventory. Wrapping each object meticulously in paper, the final rubbing of the objects take on a dissected, splayed-out flattened form. Like x-rays or blueprints, these works appear to scan deep below the surface-level knowledge of the daily objects. Bornstein’s series speaks to the idea of rubbings as an attempt to hold onto the past, mummifying these objects, resisting an ephemerality. The series expresses Bornstein’s enduring love for her father through a devotional and labor-intensive act of preservation. \(^{33}\)

Fig. 15. Jennifer Bornstein, *watches*, 2015, encaustic and wax on Kozo paper, 4.7” x 7.1.” Courtesy of the artist and Art Basel.
Rubbings have a relationship to memorializing because the process evokes a sense of both absence and presence. Historian Marcia Pointon describes the idea of absence through the abject in the context of death masks:

“Abject” means to cast out, to exclude, and to reject. The imprint is abject - it connotes the absence of something that has been cast away, whether by intention, accident, or the passage of time. In this case, it is the corpse that has been excluded, leaving the death mask as its trace. Imprints are part of everyday life… they signal the connection between a body that is no longer there and a material thing that remains. They evoke absences and, in their fragmentary character, imply disembodiment. Thus, death masks are both familiar, what we know in the form of the human face, and unfamiliar, human flesh rigidified by the effects of death and by plaster.34

This analysis provided by Pointon is applicable to rubbings. While the process retains a profound physical connection to the object from which it is taken, a mournful gap separates the impression and the real world. This evokes a disembodiment, a literal and metaphorical distance between reality and representation.35 Through the process of transformation, the subject becomes a physical transfer of memory, both that of long-term memory held within the subject and maker’s history, but also that of the memory of making the rubbing. The concreteness of the rubbing contrasts the malleability of the memory.

Rubbing as a gesture of preservation and memorialization became important when I learned of the removal of many sycamores in Forest Park. Cut down over the span of a few days when I wasn’t regularly venturing along the park, I came to find clean-cut stumps left where my beloved sycamores once stood. I was shocked. This clearing, its speed, and the fact that I had completely missed the entire removal transformed the rubbing into a precious memorial. As I grieved the trees’ sudden passing, I found a new appreciation for my rubbing: a chance for me to hold onto a remaining record of the sycamore trees’ presence.
By making works involving my immediate natural environments, inevitably I consider the temporality of the landscape through human acts of mass destruction. Trees are common symbols for environmental devastation: deforestation, forest fires, as well as archetypes for loss and the strains we exert upon the earth. I deeply care about the environmental crisis, however, when I am developing my work, my response begins from a personal, emotive place, rather than a knowledge of an inevitable demise. The productive space for me to work is one of joy and affection. I hope this personal and intimately-lead endeavor lends itself to a nuanced, multi-faceted interpretation about our role within the micro- and macro- environments.

I often title my works with the date I made the piece, like a timestamp, diary entry or naturalist’s sketchbook. The timestamp also reflects a desire to hold the precise circumstances of my encounter with a tree in time. As my rubbings have become more complex, the single date becomes a duration of multiple days. The artist Jill O’Bryan has a similar approach in titling her works, like her rubbing *nm.2.21, 2021* (graphite on paper, 10’ x 6’) which depicts traces of New Mexico’s rock formations. As an artist with an interest in presence and breadth, O’Bryan utilizes rubbings to develop a heightened consciousness within her immediate surroundings. Titling the work with this abbreviated date and location suggests the process as a personal and private endeavor rooted in place and in time.
The physicality of the rubbing extends into my display as I stretch and fasten them to wooden frames, providing a rigid structure to play with extreme weight and extreme lightness. My rubbing, 7.30.22 - 8.3.22, VT, is stretched on a triangular wooden frame, which protrudes into space at the base and recedes into the wall extending upwards. The cross bars of the frame provide a grid-like structure which is both visible and hidden through the semi-transparent muslin. Grids suggest human intervention through mapping. They also deconstruct and call attention to the fundamental backbone (stretcher) of a traditional painting. The grid with its regularity pushes up against the irregular, organic qualities of the rubbing in juxtaposition. The frame leans out from the wall, extending to provide a small space of air to see through and past the rubbing. The subtle lean also suggests the form of an open book, perhaps a moment of study.
Fig. 17. Anna Schenker, 7.30.22 - 8.3.22, VT (side view), 2022–23, crayon, muslin, and wood, 13’ 6” x 9’ 10” x 18.” Courtesy of the artist and the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.
I see this frame as a scaffolding, backrest, armature, and a direct response to painting conventions. I interpret stretcher frames as elements of construction within the history of painting, as well as architecture, and our built environments. The edge of the frame acts as a lens, like a window or doorway. Painter Dona Nelson examines and questions notions of the painting frame in her series of double-sided paintings begun in 2003. Nelson’s piece *And the Sun Came Up*, 2019 (acrylic and acrylic medium on canvas, 80” x 80”) is a part of this series, which uses the stretcher and its grid as a tool to project into the room and consume space. Nelson wants viewers to study the painting and imagine her making process. Nelson describes an interest in how the structure transforms the experience of looking at a painting into an intimate, patient experience in which viewers must walk around to experience the entire painting.36 Although my works are still dependent upon a wall, I seek to employ a similar sense of physicality and patience when experiencing my work.

Fig. 18. Dona Nelson, *And the Sun Came Up*, 2019, acrylic and acrylic medium on canvas, 80” x 80.” Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery.
Play
The act of collecting is a way to learn about a particular subject’s nuanced and complex differences. Time and collecting are inevitably linked because collecting requires one to repeatedly search, gather, and accumulate. Beginning with my rubbing *Guinea Road, 8.9.22*, I consider collecting to have a similar mechanical gesture to that of a rubbing. In my piece, *Sky Collections, Nov 22, 2023* (seeds, plastic containers, acrylic paint, and wood, 48” x 21 ½” x 7 ½”), I collected individual thistle and other airborne seeds over the course of many walks in November, 2022. After gathering my little samplings, the seeds rested in a container for four months. Stunning in their own right, I was hesitant to alter them, fearing that any intervention would stunt their inherent beauty. I decided to sort the seeds into small craft containers—separating, analyzing, and sealing. I painted half of each container with a flat blue color. Varying in shade and hue, each blue coating sought to mimic the blue of a quintessential clear blue sky. With the containers stacked together, they form a contained vista of open sky. Like a backdrop, the blue animates the seeds into individual cherished specimens.

Fig. 19. Anna Schenker, *Sky Collections, Nov 22* (detail), 2023, seeds, plastic containers, acrylic paint, and wood, 48” x 21 ½” x 7 ½”. Courtesy of the artist and the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.
I was introduced to airborne seeds as a child through aged dandelions on the playground field. Advised to make a wish, everyone plucked one from the ground, and blew – watching the seeds catch the wind and disseminate beyond us into the sky. The dandelion held the magic to make the wish come true. When collecting these seeds as an adult, I felt a similar magic, and I was brough back to a time of wishing on dandelions. The containers indicating specimens suggest they are to be used for learning, archiving, and are of elevated importance. This work is inspired by cabinets of curiosities, pet rocks, specimen jars, and craft stores, prompting a moment of reflection for the magic of the world around us.
These containers now hold a paused state of existence, one that is of great potential growth. However, they are also removed from the land that would foster their growth. The simple action of collecting with minimal intervention offers a framing device to see the seeds in a new context. The sheer delicacy and preciousness of the seeds dictated my actions. If I separated or pulled too quickly, the frail hairs would tear and break. A rubbing would disintegrate them beyond recognition. This piece required an exercise in heightened sensitivity. Throughout the process, I became highly attuned to my own grip and physical strength. I feel a similar heightened sensation when engaging in the physical interaction of a rubbing. My own body grapples with engaging the body of another.
The structure holding *Sky Containers, Nov 22* is an inverse of the triangular frame for 7.30.22 - 8.3.22, *VT*, as the tree recedes down, the seeds recede up. This clunky shelf extends towards the ground with two legs. The shelf’s heavy design contrasts the containers, which seem as light as air. I want this tension between the heaviness of the stand and the lightness of the containers to emphasize the seed’s importance – placed upon a tall stage or podium – elevating them literally.
and figuratively. This piece represents a continuous theme throughout my practice to express love and grief through tactile interaction and participation amongst nature, which I identify most closely with *play*.

I use materials and processes that foster child-like play and discovery, which create a comforting, familiar space to connect to the world around me. It is through this specific mindset that I can express my subjects’ uniqueness and vitality as well as my relationship to them. Play is a tool used in childhood to learn and understand sensory, physical, and cognitive experiences. Play is usually not considered useful or productive in adulthood, where time should be filled more efficiently. Play beyond childhood is a gesture that suggests immaturity, lacking intellectual rigor. I reject this assumption and intentionally lean into a practice oriented around discovery often through mechanisms imitating play. Play offers me access to an intimacy and curiosity that fosters interaction with my surrounding environments, removing the distant barrier instilled within me as an adult. It is through this interaction that I can access the sentiment and love I have for these beings.

I use prosaic art making materials like craft containers and crayons that can be bought at a drug store and simple processes like tracing and collecting. I seek to elevate these materials and processes through display, such as the shelf for *Sky Containers, Nov 22*. My humble materials and modes of making through rubbing, collecting, and painting amplify the trees/plants/seeds’ extraordinary character and vitality. I use the act of rubbing as a gesture of play to step back into a child-like state of mind and try to understand the evolving beings that surround me. By creating impressions, I change the context for common encounters, like a fallen tree branch or kitchen floorboards, and allow the forms to become something surprising and elevated.
The first snow of 2022 was on November 15. I’m always excited about the first snowfall. For the work, *11.15.22 Trails*, 2022 (ink, snow, muslin, and wood, 10’ x 33 ½” x 17”, 10’ x 35 ½” x 40”, 10’ x 39” x 29”), I made dozens of snowballs first thing that morning. After carrying them back to the studio and storing them in the freezer, I painted a single long line of yellow ink, then blue ink, onto strips of bleached muslin. I placed the snowballs irregularly onto the ink and let the snowballs melt. Throughout the melting process, the snow activated the ink to create pools of deep green waves and cloud-like forms. Making snowballs is an activity not usually done much in adulthood. The gesture of packing snow between one’s hands is a highly sensorial experience (similar to collecting thistle seeds or making a rubbing) that grounds the snowball-maker in the present weather of the immediate environment. Using this activity to construct large-scale paintings attempts to hold onto my joyous moment during this snowfall, as the paintings are imbued with the snow, as well as my handling of it.
Fig. 22. Anna Schenker, 11.15.22, *Trails* (in process), 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 23. Anna Schenker, 11.15.22, *Trails* (in process), 2022. Courtesy of the artist.
In the display of this piece, the muslin scrolls down to the floor, leaning against ten-foot wooden ladder structures that are the exact width of each strip of muslin. The ladder, functionally faulty, suggests its use as a tool to expand and reach beyond our physical capacities – to climb, to reach, and to see higher. The ladder gives viewers the chance to peek behind the painting to see the backside and the exposed structure. This structure, similar to the shelf for *Sky Containers, Nov 22*, seeks to elevate and transport the tactile process of making snowballs beyond a typical context.

![Image of the display of the piece](image.jpg)

**Fig. 24.** Anna Schenker, 11.15.22, *Trails*, 2022, ink, snow, muslin, and wood, (left to right) 10’ x 33 ½” x 17”, 10’ x 35 ½” x 40”, 10’ x 39” x 29.” Courtesy of the artist.

Artist Ree Morton utilizes references to childhood activities and play as a form of resistance to hierarchies within art. Often placing references to recreational objects, like see-saws, alongside paintings, Morton creates installations about play and curiosity. Her piece *Regional Work*, 1976 (oil on wood, enamel on celastic, two parts, 16” x 50” each) is a part of a series of two-part
seascape paintings made in San Diego. This series mocks the genre of landscape painting by referencing mass-produced kitsch and decoration, such as fish memorabilia and “sublime” sunset paintings. Billowing curtains frame the fish and seascape, accentuating their indistinguishable grandiosity. Morton’s humor and handicraft mimicry directly rejects hierarchies within the history of painting and art in general. Morton navigates between sincere sentiment and the use of unconventional materials that situate her work between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional. Like Morton, I see myself navigating a space between painting and sculpture as a means to feel less confined to the conventions and expectations between either genre. Artist Cornelia Parker says of Morton’s work, “There is a sense of questioning the whole notion of monumentality and significance – undermining it with gesture, humor, and color.”

Morton uses the power of traditionally serious (male) art before her to construct her own lineage.

Fig. 25. Ree Morton, *Regional Work*, 1976, oil on wood, enamel on celastic, two parts, 16” x 50” each. Courtesy of the artist and Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles.
The use of child-like play and discovery through materials in my practice serves as a tool to construct my own space of understanding and acceptance. When analyzing her positioning within art history, and her role within it, Dona Nelson said, “Where do I fit in? Women artists don’t really have a natural lineage to painting. They really don’t. That’s the reason I can make things influenced by Barnett Newman and influenced by my mother. That’s a political statement. I’m the receiver and I have no hierarchy, because I’m not a part of that history.”

Nelson’s statement suggests that women’s exclusion from these hierarchies fosters the inevitable need to construct an original, new path. This path is liberated from the confines of artistic hierarchy because women weren’t a part of the hierarchy to begin with. Nelson declares an equal value for inspiration stemming from art history, family, and craft, which is a perspective I seek to pursue within my work. I feel I am constructing my own language and developing my own criticism through these unapologetic gestures of play and love.

My use of craft and readymade materials like Crayola crayons and plastic craft containers is an empathic gesture, granting access to understanding how the work is made. I’m interested in using this as a tool to destabilize the idea of the artist as genius and to navigate my level of control in my role as the artist. It is a statement to construct monumental rubbings, sizing close to the canvases of the abstract expressionists, with simply a handful of crayons. The act serves as a reference to the trope of big, male paintings that came before me. I pursue a tension between the humbleness and smallness of the material and the scale of the artwork to directly comment on painting’s elitism and to instead begin to remove barriers and assumptions.
Conclusion
I pay tribute to the minute and the monumental found within my immediate natural surroundings. I work between sculpture, painting, and rubbings to memorialize natural beings and environments embracing wonder, closeness, and curiosity. Through indexical processes, my works within themselves and among each other create a layered timeline – a mature tree nearing the end of a long life (7.30.22 - 8.3.22, VT) to a timespan of the seedling just begun (Sky Containers, Nov 22). There is also my own timespan as well as the timespan of making. This conflating duration allows me to feel a part of a timespan extending far beyond my own. These works are traces of both presence and absence, past and future.

I engage in systems of making, which might suggest calculated, mechanical gestures that are executed as a means to preserve and hold onto time. And that is true, but really at the end of the day, I am out in the snow making a big pile of snowballs, catching wispy thistle seeds, and in the grass making rubbings of tree roots. I hope that these sorts of acts and my joy for them remain at the forefront of my artistic practice. I believe that giving simple gestures space to be seen holds immense power. Through these acts, I seek to express and evoke a sense of hope – a hope for a sensitivity, kindness, and care.

I look forward to continuing on my walks and allowing daily occurrences to lead me to my next project in a site-responsive way. The space I navigate is a multi-faceted one that involves a compilation of layered emotions such as joy, overwhelm, sadness, and curiosity. I conflate the pleasure of play, alongside the grief of memorializing, and the sentiment of paying tribute. I believe emotions of sadness and pleasure may not be very far apart, because what we love may eventually give way to loss.

I’m grateful to my beloved sycamores for sending me down this path. Thank you.
Notes


2 Rebecca Solnit is an American writer, activist, and historian whose research includes themes of feminism, the environment, power, and social change.


7 Robin Wall Kimmerer is a plant ecologist, educator, writer, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.


11 Suzanne Simard is a forest ecologist specializing in plant communication and intelligence.


13 Jabr, “Social Life of Forests.”

14 Carolee Schneemann was a multimedia artist who worked in film, performance, and painting. Her paintings from the 1950s and 1960s are considered the beginning of her exploration between painting and the body.


18 Knight, “Apparitions.”


20 Knight, “Apparitions.”

21 In Chelsea, New York City, when Suh learned about his landlord’s death and that he would have to give up the apartment.


26 Pindyck, “Frottage as Inquiry,” 15.

27 Schiff, “Tracings and Rubbings,” 66.


31 Jabr, “Social Life of Forests.”


35 Schiff, “Tracings and Rubbings,” 64–66.


37 Lucy R. Lippard et al., *Ree Morton: At the Still Point of the Turning World* (New York: Drawing Center, 2009), 33.


Bibliography


