The Cicadas are Always Beneath our Feet

Mary Kate Charles

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa

Part of the Art and Design Commons, and the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation
Charles, Mary Kate, "The Cicadas are Always Beneath our Feet" (2024). Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers. 117.
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/117

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
The Cicadas are Always Beneath our Feet

Mary Kate Charles

May 3, 2024

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art

Washington University in St. Louis Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
Abstract

In an era of exposure to thousands of images every day with practically unlimited access to the world’s archive of art, this essay explores the legacy of the productions of medieval convents and the women who would encounter only a few art objects each year as documented by historians Chiara Frugoni, Jeffrey Hamburger, and Sharon Strocchia. In this era of visual overconsumption, this essay proposes the body of work, *Where the Cicadas Burrow* as an archive utilizing alternative printing processes to pull forward the tradition of liturgical arts many religious women would have participated in historically. Operating within a contemporary sphere, the *Where the Cicadas Burrow* models artists like Christine Elfman who utilize natural dyes and materials to celebrate alternative folk processes while integrating modern technology into the printing process. While the reductive process of the laser engraver creates a mysterious aura, the combination of advanced technology with slow handmade processes creates shroud-like compositions. *Where the Cicadas Burrow* explores the role of spirituality in contemporary art while inviting viewers to pause and reflect on cycles of change before moving along.
I. Introduction

While we are exposed to thousands of images every day with practically unlimited access to the world’s archive of art, I am intrigued by the productions of medieval convents I study and the women who would encounter only a few art objects each year. In this era of visual overconsumption, I’m interested in utilizing alternative printing processes to pull forward the tradition of liturgical arts many religious women would have participated in historically. My work with natural dyes and materials celebrates alternative folk processes, while I utilize modern technology in my printing process. While the reductive process of the laser engraver creates a mysterious aura, I am interested in combining advanced technology with slow handmade processes. Though my multidisciplinary practice spans from alternative folk printmaking to film, I consider each discipline a work of time based media.

Where the Cicadas Burrow is decidedly a work of time based media, as the dyed fabric will inevitably fade and fray. This installation occupies the corner of a gallery space. The work in Figure 1 invites viewers into a humbling position with a worn kneeler resting below the wall hangings. A heraldry banner and series of panels set in an a-frame formation surround the kneeler, indicating this space is a place for quiet and contemplation. Both materially and compositionally, I utilize symbols denoting a period of waiting. The fermentation of red wine and sketches of the annual arrival of cicadas and the deterioration of bones, like relics, investigates this question of hiding as a form of natural protection. Each of these natural cycles invites the viewer into a reflection on the passing of time.
II. Process as Research: Historically Concealed Spaces and Quieted Women

_Where the Cicadas Burrow_ investigates Catholic monastic productions and the hands of their anonymous makers. As the primary producers of vestments were religious sisters enclosed in convents; my compositions explore the tension of women living in cloistered isolation and their legacy. When dealing with art objects, space between the researcher and the actual production of the archive necessitates a larger discussion about the constraints of the archive.
Convent scholar Sharon Strocchia conducts her research on the monastic productions of Renaissance Florence through written descriptions of visual culture, as the art objects she desires to study have since been lost to time. Strocchia examines the extensive written archive of the Santa Verdiana convent in Florence, Italy. This written archive describes the immense production of liturgical vestments the nuns produced. Strocchia’s work testifies to the fragility of textiles as ephemeral objects. Her work is an example of the necessity of preserving these fugitive artistic productions and continuing to preserve these artistic practices. The elusive nature of these objects is common with liturgical works subject to Iconoclasm and devotional objects passed from generation to generation without protection. As Strocchia has no option but to rely on the preserved word, this conversation becomes particularly precious when discussing the history of erasure of liturgical and devotional objects as well as the craft of women.

In the wake of contemporary scholarship geared towards the recovery of women’s work, convent scholar Jeffrey Hamburger’s *Nuns as Artists* investigates the productions of cloistered nuns and the history of erasure. Despite scholars’ attempts to reframe the conversation surrounding “nuns’ work,” *nonnen arbeiten* is dismissed as rudimentary and “stands by definition for deficiency: a lack of both skill and sophistication” (Hamburger 3). The art historical connotations of craft as lesser than fine art are largely due to the association of craft with women’s or nun’s work. This distinction is evident in the case study of the Benedictine nuns of Sant’Apollonia, who commissioned the first Renaissance refectory in Florence. Andrea del Castagno (1421-1457) painted the wall of the refectory with the customary scene of the Last
Supper in 1445.

Figure 2. Andrea del Castagno, *The Last Supper* (1445), Fresco

The nuns shared every meal in this room and thus reflected on this permanent and lasting artwork. The form of the fresco contrasts the very ephemeral work including “lace collars, and various handcrafted textile items” the sisters routinely produced (Dunn and Weddle 303). Though these handcrafted items are lost or decayed, scholars rely on letters to understand the visuals of the work. The preservation and recovery of women’s work is particularly precious given the dismissal of such a rich tradition of material culture produced in convents. In pursuit of this recovery, contemporary scholars might attempt to elevate nun’s work to the status of art, but the nature of devotional work resists such attention.  

This historical context greatly informs my work, as I seek to work within this tradition while leaning into the time sensitive qualities of these materials.

Aside from the overlooked rich tradition of women’s devotional artistry, cultivation of the interior life was an integral part of these sisters’ artistic practice. As Post-Tridentine nuns worked, they were instructed on the spiritual exercises of contemplation as scholar of Catholic mysticism Frugoni explains:

> reflecting on a text or an image thus allows the imagination to construct, out of the supply of figurative and textual echoes stored in the memory, a new mental image that becomes

---

1 Aside from the widely known figures such as Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, and Margery Kempe, most women in convents have remained nameless without existing attributable work.
ever clearer, like a film exposed to the image or text that was the starting point of the meditation, until it acquires an emotional and affective charge that can make it come to life (Frugoni 7).

These instructions for meditative labor were paired with a reinvigorated restricted convent environment. This experience of meditative labor carried forward the tradition of “green martyrdom” as Pope Gregory I outlined in his Homilae xl in Evangelia, or forty homilies delivered from 591-593. He encouraged the Celtic rite of Catholicism which emphasized the lifestyle of monastic labor and the retreat into nature as a form of spiritual devotion (Pope Gregory I). Concealed and quieted, I am interested in this gesture of hiding as protection, penance, or mourning. In Figure 3, this closeup of my heraldry banner consists of a repeating pattern of cicadas, the remains of a female pelvis, and various species of groundcover. These botanical drawings and archeological approach to representation invites the viewer into this immersive experience of wilderness. Just as personal devotion was so essential to the lives of nun artists, so this heraldry banner encourages contemplation through the repetition of printed imagery.
III. Alternative Processes: My Contemporary Artistic Lineage

As I cultivate my own symbolic representations, I conflate the cross-cultural trope of the long haired wild woman. Much of Irish mythology and oral folktales share themes that syncretically reflect work produced within both preChristian and Christian contexts: stories of transformation, exile, and loss. These include the banshee, who is conventionally depicted combing her long hair in lamentation while her cry signals an imminent death, as well as the
selkie’s longing to isolate from society and return to the sea. While I investigate folkloric and Christian artifacts, my research-based drawings narrate these feelings of loneliness and the communal experiences with nature of “Green Martyrdom.” Though scholars typically apply the term “Green Martyrdom” to male monastic productions, this sentiment of radical seclusion rings true in the context of female exile from society, whether willing or forced.² Within all of these stories, it is clear there is a kind of agency in seclusion as a reclamation of power. In Figure 4, I depict a woman hiding in an undefined landscape.

Figure 4. Mary Kate Charles, *Where the Cicadas Burrow* Closeup (2024), Red Wine, Vinegar, Birch Wood

² From La Llorona to Pelléas et Mélisande, the trope of the long haired woman is present in vastly different cultures. This theme of seclusion is particularly evident in the case of Mary Magdalene. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, tradition believes she lived the rest of her days in contemplation in a cavern in the French alps. She is conventionally depicted with flowing hair so long as to be socially abnormal. Donatello’s wooden sculpture of Mary is particularly striking, with her ragged figure and aged face.
Drawing from this connection between the socially exiled woman inhabiting the wilderness, I work within the forms of sacred textiles like paraments but in the context of the contemporary symbolist movement. In seeking spirituality through their practice, artists including Nadia Waheed (1992-) explore aging processes of women in connection to the wilderness.

Figure 5. Nadia Waheed, *Four Figures* (2022), oil on canvas

In *Four Figures*, Waheed depicts four pairs of haloed legs walking in line. Unclothed, Waheed assigns each body its own logic of color. Each limb feels like a flattened, eternal void occupying some celestial space (Waheed). These bodies seem to reference infinite space as they trudge above a fifth figure lying underneath the earth in the fetal position. This mourning woman’s body is painted with a luminescent, almost x-ray palette. Though Waheed portrays her in a position of weakness, this figure is unbreakable, with the earth forming around her body. I pull from these historical and contemporary tropes to continue my own thread of personal seeking and paying homage to the wild woman.
While Waheed integrates spirituality with the contemporary art realm, artist Christine Elfman works with alternative printing practices to similarly examine themes of gendered concealment. Deeply interested in exploring the impermanence of memory, she creates anthotypes and prints with botanical materials. In her *Anthotype Dress Project*, her anthotypes compose the inner lining of the dress.

![Anthotype Dress Project](image)

The dress’s light-sensitive materials may only be viewed if exposed to light. In addition to the revealing nature of looking under a woman’s dress, the very materials echo this invasion of privacy or security. Elfman states “the gaze of the viewer witnesses the gradual destruction of the image,” so the viewer becomes complicit in the death of the art object (Elfman). My naturally dyed works similarly face the realities of photosensitive reactions. Though this
acknowledgement of impermanence can feel grim, I view the sourcing of pigments and dyes as a playful process. I delight in the labor of boiling, straining, and drying materials. Like Elfman, I enjoy the mystery in the unknown and ever changing lifespan of a naturally dyed object.

Figure 4. Mary Kate Charles, *Passing* (2024) Red Wine, Vinegar, and Oil on canvas

I print my drawings onto both naturally dyed canvas, inspired by stories of quieted women. Dyed with red wine, the fabric absorbs the rich purple color.\(^3\) Subtle shifts in color and tone create an illusionary atmosphere and imaginative depth. I laser engrave and intaglio print

\(^3\) The history of the color purple is inundated with religious and historical connotations. Early sourcing of purple dye is attributed to the Phoenicians who extracted the color from sea mollusks. An expensive product, purple fabric was reserved for the elite. As such, the color purple is ripe with connotations of wealth and royalty. In the Catholic tradition, purple represents seasons of penance and waiting during Advent and Lent in the Liturgical Year.
my drawings with transparent base, allowing the natural dye to gently seep through each image. I work with a large swath of fabric to emulate the form of an Ecclesiastical heraldry banner. As I utilize alternative printing processes to create work inspired by both religious traditions, my work investigates the tensions of intentionally creating with fugitive materials as well as producing work that conceals the hand of the artist. I am interested in the visual effect of the laser engraver on canvas. The resulting effect of the laser engraved fabric conceals each image’s printing process. Appearing as if the print has miraculously appeared, the drawings become irrevocably ingrained in the material (Figure 2). The source of the print becomes some predetermined hand. This time based and indiscernible process creates a sense of mystery that reflects the traditions inspiring the compositions. This hidden process mirrors these historically hidden women.

IV. Conclusion

*Where the Cicadas Burrow* explores the implications of creating intentionally ephemeral work. As I utilize natural materials and hidden processes, I hope to reflect the histories of hidden women. Though hidden or concealed, their artistic productions without a traditional artist’s signature direct the viewer’s attention to something greater than the individual. Though I study the time based nature of traditional arts, the intentional creation of ephemeral work is no longer futile with our ability to immortalize the inevitable fading and fraying through photography and film. By looking to the past, I hope to highlight the importance of documenting fugitive materials and recognizing the preciousness of “the archive” today. Though the cicadas wait one year, fourteen years, even seventeen years to reemerge, they’re constantly undergoing cycles of change underneath our very feet. My work seeks to heighten the awareness of viewers to these quiet happenings and inspire curiosity for everyday aging processes all around us.
Works Cited

Dunn, Marilyn, and Saundra Weddle, editors. *Convent Networks in Early Modern Italy*. Brepols, 2020,

https://www.academia.edu/28210305/\_Knowing\_Hands\_Nuns\_and\_the\_Needle\_Arts\_in\_Renaissance\_Italy\_in\_Artiste\_nel\_chiostro\_Produzione\_artistica\_nei\_monasteri\_femmini\_ili\_in\_eta\_moderna\_Florence\_2015\_ed\_Sheila\_Barker\_with\_Luciano\_Cinelli\_pp\_31\_52\_Special\_issue\_of\_Memorie\_Domenicane\_46\_2015\_.


Pope Gregory I, *Homilae xl in Evangelia*, 591-593
List of Figures

1. Mary Kate Charles, Where the Cicadas Burrow, 2024, Red Wine, Vinegar, Transparent Base on Muslin, Canvas, and Birch Wood

2. Andrea del Castagno, *The Last Supper*, 1445, Fresco

3. Mary Kate Charles, *Where the Cicadas Burrow* Closeup, 2024, Red Wine and Transparent Base on Muslin


5. Nadia Waheed, *Four Figures*, 2022, oil on canvas


7. Mary Kate Charles, *Passing*, 2024, Red Wine, Vinegar, and Oil on canvas
Bibliography

Dunn, Marilyn, and Saundra Weddle, editors. *Convent Networks in Early Modern Italy*. Brepols, 2020,


Pope Gregory I, Homilae xl in Evangelia, 591-593