Eight thousand daughters woven into bayou birds

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EIGHT THOUSAND DAUGHTERS
WOVEN INTO BAYOU BRAIDS

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

by
Megan Marie Singleton
B.F.A., Webster University, 2005
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ABSTRACT

Over the course of the last year I have spent nearly every weekend investigating this aquatic landscape by canoe, deciphering the differences between native and invasive flora and fauna. I am interested in ways that art can address the natural world. My thesis exhibition, *Eight Thousand Daughters Woven into Bayou Braids*, depicts and interprets the Louisiana landscape, exploring the destructive beauty and materiality of invasive aquatic plants.
CHAPTER ONE: LOUISIANA: A PALACE OF PLANTS AND PAPERMAKING

INTRODUCTION

Louisiana’s bayous are captivating and majestically unique, abounding with biologically diverse ecosystems precariously enduring the challenging impacts of humans and invasive species of plants and animals. There are over four hundred bayous braided across the state. Over the course of the last year I have spent nearly every weekend investigating this aquatic landscape by canoe, deciphering the differences between native and invasive flora and fauna. I am interested in ways that art can address the natural world. My thesis exhibition, *Eight Thousand Daughters Woven into Bayou Braids*, depicts and interprets the Louisiana landscape, exploring the destructive beauty and materiality of invasive aquatic plants.

Figure 1- Canoeing Shell Bayou in Manchac Swamp

THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY AND ARTISTIC SENSIBILITY

I am committed to incorporating sustainable methods into my artistic practice. By using the art of papermaking I can transform local materials such as plant fiber into handmade papers, thus eliminating the need to have pre-processed material, such as linters, shipped to me. My papermaking skills coupled with an interest in exploring the landscape led me to investigate the potential of aquatic invasive plants as a raw material. Using plants that are currently being eradicated with chemicals by the state of Louisiana, I am approaching my work methods with a
conscious choice to limit the amount of resources I consume while simultaneously embedding a sense of place into the sculptural objects I create using these hand made papers.

The small gesture of removing portions of invasive plant from the environment and using them to make paper appeals to my sensibilities. I have refined my expertise of the art of papermaking over the last seven years and utilize my knowledge of the process to create intellectual work in a contemporary context using an ancient craft. Collecting, testing, and discovering the properties of plant fibers to be used in papermaking and sculpture is a catalyst for my studio practice. This process of material selection allows me to physically embed elements of regional specificity and meaning into my work. It is this physicality of the process that I am attracted to, discovering the alchemical nature of various plants and their ability to be manipulated and formed. The investigation of ecological relationships within society and the landscape is the basis of my current work.

Every environment contains ecosystems that are constantly evolving through a series of slow transformations. Humans have the ability to alter the environment faster than nature’s ability to uphold equilibrium. 1 One such action is the introduction of an exotic species into the ecosystem. Louisiana is home to 3,249 species of vascular plants, of which twenty five percent are non-native. Numerous species in this group are problematic and considered invasive. They marginalize native species and threaten the natural balance that sustains the ecosystem. 2

At the beginning of this project I was attempting to fulfill my naturalist’s desire to get a closer look into the fascinating network of bayous that I was surrounded by but could not access without a boat. (Fig. 2). This instigated a trip to St. Louis to retrieve a canoe from storage, and was followed by a year of material research and invasive plant collection in the swamps of Louisiana. Although I have traveled all across the southern region of the state canoeing bayous, the dominant sites I chose for this project were in the Manchac Swamp and Atchafalaya Basin, due to their proximity to Baton Rouge and the historic significance of these waterways.

Figure 2- North Pass of Manchac Swamp

1 Samuel C. Hyde, Jr. and Keith M. Finley “One of the Prettiest Spots I Have Seen:” Politics, Industry, and the Destruction of the Manchac Ecosystem (Hammond: Southeastern Louisiana University, 2006), 1.

CHAPTER TWO: EXPLORING BAYOUS AND EXAMINING PLANTS

MANCHAC SWAMP

During my first trip to research plants in the Manchac Swamp I was overwrought and anxious. It was an overcast spring afternoon when we put in at Shell Bayou. The path was lined with tall wild grasses, Cyprus and palmetto trees, all towering over us in the canoe. We glided through jet-black water spotted with carpets of peculiar green plants. Timidly, we paddled down the main channel as it became narrower and narrower. It seemed as though the Cyprus trees covered in Spanish moss were closing in on us. We witnessed one followed by seven alligators crossing the bayou in front of us. My heart was racing as we changed the course of our direction. As we paddled on I began to observe what I could only describe as a quiet commotion all around us. The dark still water reflected like glass rippling only when schools of baitfish swam by or other aquatic life rustled below us. Camouflaged turtles leapt off logs as we paddled by and water plants bobbed up and down along the shoreline in our subtle wake.

This trip overwhelmed my sense, particularly visually; there were so many plants that all looked so similar. How was I ever going to decipher which were native and invasive? I met this challenging task with an earnest amount of research fueled by the desire to understand the environment I was immersing myself in. Research is a crucial part of my artistic practice and it undertakes many forms. For this project it included finding visual, scientific, and historical information on plants and sites, traversing and photographing the bayou, and collecting and observing plants and artifacts encountered on my excursions.

Upon examining satellite images of the Manchac Swamp, I was struck by the patterns of radial lines I saw running through the marsh (Fig.3). I learned these lines were canals dredged at the turn of the Twentieth Century during a massive Cyprus deforestation of the area during this time. These canals allow for much saltwater intrusion into the swamp, prohibiting the growth of Cyprus saplings planted in restoration efforts. The destructive beauty of these patterns inspired the piece, *Manchac: Lines of the Dredge*, in which I interpreted the patterns with a paper made from a plant that has its own history destructive beauty, the Water Hyacinth.

Figure 3- Satellite Image of Dredging Lines in Manchac Swamp
INVASIVE AQUATIC PLANTS IDENTIFIED

I began by identifying the characteristics of the two most common and destructive invasive aquatic plants in Louisiana. The Water Hyacinth, *Eichhornia crassipes* originates from South America and was brought to the United States during the 1884 Cotton Exposition held in New Orleans (Fig. 5). It was a gift from Japanese delegates and distributed throughout the state as decorative flora for ponds. This perennial plant with thick glossy leaves was prized for its large and beautiful violet flowers and its unique bulbous form. The plant proliferated rapidly into the waterways of Louisiana and in surrounding southern states.³ Water hyacinth is one of the world’s most productive plants. A single plant can produce up to 5000 seeds and scientists predict one plant can produce up to 8000 daughter plants forming off rhizomes in the period one month. This production rate allows the plant to form dense green mats that infest waterways (Fig. 6).⁴

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³ Hyde and Finely, *One of the Prettiest*, 73.

Figure 5- Water Hyacinth Detail

Figure 6- Hyacinth Infestation in the Atchafalaya Basin
The second plant I identified was Alligator Weed, *Alternanthera philoxeroides* (Fig. 7). This invasive plant also originates from South America. It is believed that the species was transported to the U.S. through the ballast water of cargo ships. This floating perennial forms thick impenetrable mats along the shoreline making access to land difficult. It has also been known to creep up and begin growing in soil. Bright pink new growth or roots sprout from each node on the plants long, hollow tubular stalks. The submerged root mats provide habitats for micro and macro aquatic invertebrates, and as the plant decomposes it provides nutrients for even more aquatic life. Alligator weed has a fragrant white flower resembling that of a clover and each flower only produces one seed within the fruit.  

![Figure 7- Alligator Weed](image)

Once I felt confident in identifying these plants out in the swamp, I had to start looking in the right places, which took a number of excursions. What I discovered was an infestation of Alligator Weed in the Manchac Swamp, especially in the area near the North Pass; and that there was a quite serious infestation of Water Hyacinth in the Atchafalaya Basin, especially in the area near Lake Pelba and Henderson Lake.

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http://aquaplant.tamu.edu/plant-identification/alphabetical-index/alligator-weed/
COLLECTION, OBSERVATION, AND PROCESS

The next step in my process was to collect samples of the Water Hyacinth and Alligator Weed and test their ability to be made into paper pulp. This also proved to be an interesting experience and quite a sight for the local fisher people. I outfitted the canoe with a 60-gallon Rubbermaid container and a garden rake on a 3’ pole and we were set. After I spotted a patch of invasive plants we paddle over, I would whack the patch with my rake to hopefully scare away any snakes or alligators and then proceed to fill my tub. This method showed to be tried and true; collecting and investigating these plant fiber became an essential part of the process of making this body of work.

Figure 8- Collecting Water Hyacinth

Figure 9- Collecting Alligator Weed
After bringing the plants back to the studio to examine and process I began making discoveries within the containers that housed them. I had harvested entire ecosystems when I collected these entangled mats of plants. As I began pulling plants apart water spiders and beetles jumped about, premature crawfish wiggled about, leaches slithered in the water, and dragonflies hatched before my eyes. This observation made me rethink the role of these invasive plants. Yes, they were choking out native flora and clogging waterways, but were they not also hosting all of these other forms of life? This experience also made me rethink the role of the artwork I was making with the material of this plant. I was still interested in the gesture of removing portions this invasive plant, but the work would also celebrate and honor this plant as a thriving life force. This modus operandi can be related to the work of artist Patterson Clark.
CHAPTER 3: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO MAKING ART

CONTEXT IN CONCONTEMPORARY ART

Patterson Clark is artist and employee of the National Parks Service occupied in the Washington D.C area. While working for the parks services eradicating invasive weeds in the city he came to a realization. In an interview with Linton Weeks of NPR he stated, “One day I was pulling a weed, and I realized there was a little grain of hostility there toward this invasive plant," Clark says over a cup of ginger tea in his kitchen. "And I stopped and thought: I don't want to be this way in nature. I don't want to be in an adversarial mode when I'm in nature. So how can I change my attitude to make this more of a positive experience?

And the word 'harvest' came to mind.” He began making art supplies such as brushes, paper, and ink from the plants he was ‘harvesting’, he then uses these tools to beautifully illustrate the plants he has uprooted.6

Both the Alligator Weed and Water Hyacinth demonstrated the ability to be made into excellent papers to be used for my sculptural practices and sheet forming. The alligator weed has long white fibers encased within and olive slurry of pulp. Surprisingly, the water hyacinth broke down into a luscious black pulp reminiscent of the waterways in Shell Bayou. The deep black shade of the paper also acts as a metaphor for the destructive dark side of this plant that is still prized for its beauty.

At this point it is important to speak about how I view my artistic practice and of the importance of process in my work. My process begins the moment I open the map to decide which bayou I will be traveling to. It continues through to the immersion in the landscape taking photographs and collecting fiber, wherein these experiences, collections, and documented imagery directly inspire the work that is created in the studio. I find that the paper making

http://www.npr.org/2011/02/28/134054004/the-art-of-war-on-invasive-species
process allows me to add layers of depth and site specificity to my work. My ways of working are inspired by Site Restoration works like Betty Beaumont’s, *Ocean Landmark*, wherein she created a fish habitat from an industrial byproduct that would neutralize toxicity levels in the water (Fig. 11). This work required a series of imaging techniques and to document the habitat underwater exhibited beside maquettes and scientific data. In the *Ethics of Earth Art*, Amanda Boetzkes comments, “…while the project itself has a real impact on the ecosystem, *Ocean Landmark* is also an assembly of images and objects that have been abstracted from the literal environment and yet call attention to it in such a way that we might reconsider its value.” Although my small gesture of removing portions of invasive plants may only have a small impact on the ecosystem of the swamp, *Eight Thousand Daughters* shares an intent to call attention to a specific environmental concern and a similar visual presentation with Beaumont’s *Oceans Landmark*.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 11- Betty Beaumont, "Ocean Landmark", LandSat7 altered satellite photograph with locator of the Ocean Landmark Underwater Site. 1980 (photo: Betty Beaumont)**

In *The Ethics of Earth Art*, Amanda Boetzkes also discusses Joseph Beuys conception of “social sculpture” and his work *Energy Plan for the Western Man* stating, “Essentially Beuys took on the view that everyone should participate in the shaping of society…Beuys energy plan was to redefine art as a public dialog that included all citizens, as well as animals and elemental forces.” Like Beuys, through this exhibition I was interested in creating a dialog with the viewer that questioned the hierarchal roles within the ecology of the bayou. I am calling attention to both the interrelationships between different plant species and human behaviors in the environment, examining how the ecology of a place is impacted depending on which species is thriving, overpopulating and controlling the use an areas natural resources.

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7 Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethic of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 31-33.
THE EXHIBIT: A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

The pulp painting series, *Louisiana Bayous: Invasive Plant Collection Routes* is a selection of fourteen drawings created from alligator weed and water hyacinth fibers that documents the bayous I canoed to gather these fibers (Fig. 12). They visually and physically embody a sense of place, dominating the back wall of the gallery stretching 33 feet in length and 8 feet in height.

Another lure of paper making is the alchemical process of transforming a plant into a pulp slurry that can be made into paper, turned into a medium for mark making, or cast upon objects. I am drawn to the versatility of paper and pulp, but it is not the only medium I employ. I use cast bronze to create intimate studies of the hyacinth plants for this exhibit. I chose this material because it echoes the plants properties of strength and resilience (Fig. 13). In another piece hyacinth leaves are cast in paper clay and fired (Fig. 14, 15). These pieces, extremely light and fragile, dangle from two long sheets of hyacinth paper expressing the delicate balances found in the hierarchical relationships within the ecology of the bayous, both between species of flora, fauna, and people.

My approach to this body of work was multi faceted. First, I wanted to create a situation that mimicked my observations of the relationship between plants in the swamp. Upon entering the gallery I place the viewer in an installation of plant forms simulating the alligator weed and water hyacinth (Fig. 15). The abstract sculptures are a abs hybrid of both plants. The petal form references the hyacinth whereas the stalk composition is reminiscent of the Alligator Weed. Metaphorically the sculptures represent the role of the invasive plants on the ecology of the swamp, as they surrounding and encroaching upon the viewer, which represents the native flora. The sculptures are constructed of wire armature covered with taught sheets of alligator weed and hyacinth paper. As one navigates through the work it subtly bobs up and down mimicking the subtle motion of the plants along the shore of the bayou. The sounds of this motion are reminiscent of slight scrape of a paddle or driftwood rubbing the side of the canoe.
Figure 12- “Louisiana Bayous: Invasive Plant Collection Routes” detail

Figure 13- “Hyacinth Study #1” detail
Figure 14- “A Delicate Balance” (photo: Kelly Tate)

Figure 15- “A Delicate Balance” detail
Another facet of this work is to educate people about the properties and impact of these two invasive plants contrasted with picturesque landscape images of the sites the plants were invading (Fig.16). A large format book lays opens on a table in the gallery welcoming viewers to leaf through the pages. The colophon states, “This book documents my experiences collecting the invasive aquatic plants Alligator Weed and Water Hyacinth in Louisiana Bayous. These plants were then used to create the exhibition *Eight Thousand Daughters Woven Into Bayou Braids*. The locations documented include Manchac Swamp, the Atchafalaya Basin, Vermillion Bay, and the Chenier Plains.” The pages consist of photographs printed on handmade paper, samples of the alligator weed and hyacinth papers, and sheets of watermarked text describing the introduction and qualities of the invasive plants used to create the exhibition. I purposely kept this information within the confines of a watermark and book to allow the viewer a sense of discovery. They will also gain contextual understanding of the work and feel the materiality of the paper as they flip through the pages.
CONCLUSION

It is my goal that a viewer comes away from this exhibition with a curiosity about the complex role of invasive species, a desire to explore the unique landscape that surrounds us, or questioning the hierarchies that exist within the fragile ecology found in Louisiana’s Bayous. I am interested in the ways that art can address the natural world. The exhibition *Eight Thousand Daughters* attempts to create a dialog amongst viewers concerning how we experience and regard the natural landscape in the Bayou State.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Megan Singleton was born in 1982, in Saint Louis Missouri. She received her BFA in photography from Webster University in Saint Louis and her MFA in Sculpture from Louisiana State University. As an interdisciplinary artist, she creates site-specific installations that resonate with the materiality and rhythms of the natural world. Her most recent works intertwine the sculptural manipulation of handmade paper, cast bronze, found objects, and large format books arts and pulp paintings.